

GREEK
CULTURE
IN THE
ROMAN
WORLD

Steven D. Smith

Man and Animal in Severan Rome

The Literary Imagination of
Claudius Aelianus



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MAN AND ANIMAL IN SEVERAN ROME

The Roman sophist Claudius Aelianus, born in Praeneste in the late second century CE, spent his career cultivating a Greek literary persona. Aelian was a highly regarded writer during his own lifetime, and his literary compilations would be influential for a thousand years and more in the Roman world. This book argues that the *De natura animalium*, a miscellaneous treasury of animal lore and Aelian's greatest work, is a sophisticated literary critique of Severan Rome. Aelian's fascination with animals reflects the cultural issues of his day: philosophy, religion, the exoticism of Egypt and India, sex, gender, and imperial politics. This study also considers how Aelian's interests in the *De natura animalium* are echoed in his other works, the *Rustic Letters* and the *Varia historia*. Himself a prominent figure of mainstream Roman Hellenism, Aelian refined his literary aesthetic to produce a reading of nature that is both moral and provocative.

STEVEN D. SMITH is Associate Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at Hofstra University. He is the author of *Greek Identity and the Athenian Past in Chariton: The Romance of Empire* (2007).

GREEK CULTURE IN THE ROMAN WORLD

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STEVEN D. SMITH



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For Dick

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A note on names, texts, and abbreviations

Anyone who writes about Romans who wrote in Greek is faced with the dilemma about how to refer to his or her subject, i.e. with a Greek or a Roman name. Is our writer going to be Klaudios Ailianos or Claudius Aelianus? I have opted for neither, choosing instead and as a compromise the Anglicized form Aelian. Well-known writers in Greek and Latin have been named in accordance with English convention, thus: Homer, Plato, Euripides, Vergil, Horace, Pliny, Athenaeus, Philostratus, etc. The names of Greek writers less well known have been transliterated without macrons, thus: Eudemos, Nikostratos, Phularkhos, etc. Most Greek place names have been transliterated as well without macrons (thus Keos, Knidos, Porosele, etc.), but Athens, Syracuse, Thebes, etc., have retained their more conventional spellings.

For the text of Aelian's *De natura animalium*, I have followed the Teubner edition of Manuela García Valdés, Luis Alfonso Llera Fueyo, and Lucía Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009). For the text of the *Rustic Letters*, I have used Benner and Fobes' Loeb edition of *The Letters of Alciphron, Aelian, and Philostratus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1949), though I have also consulted the editions of Domingo-Forasté (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1994) and Leone (Milan: Istituto editoriale Cisalpino-La goliardica, 1974). For the text of the *Varia historia*, I have used Dilts' edition (Leipzig: Teubner, 1974), though I have also consulted Wilson's Loeb edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Abbreviations of authors and works in Greek and Latin follow the conventions in the *Greek-English Lexicon* by Liddell, Scott, and Jones and in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.

AA	<i>Antike und Abendland</i>
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
AJPh	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>

<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> . Berlin and New York: De Gruyter.
<i>ASNP</i>	<i>Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Cl. di Lettere e Filosofia</i>
<i>BICS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London</i>
<i>CA</i>	<i>Classical Antiquity</i>
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Classical Journal</i>
<i>CREBM</i>	Mattingly, H. 1950. <i>Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum</i> , Volume 5: <i>Pertinax to Elagabalus</i> . London: Trustees of the British Museum.
<i>CW</i>	<i>Classical World</i>
<i>GLR</i>	García Valdés, M., Llera Fueyo, L. A., and Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén, L. (eds.) 2009. <i>Aelianus. De Natura Animalium</i> . Berlin and New York: De Gruyter.
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>HSPh</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>LSJ</i>	Liddell, H. G. and Scott, R. 1996. <i>A Greek–English Lexicon</i> . Revised and augmented by H. S. Jones. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press.
<i>LTUR</i>	Steinby, E. M. (ed.) 1993–2000. <i>Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae</i> . Rome: Edizioni Quasar.
<i>MH</i>	<i>Museum Helveticum</i>
<i>RFIC</i>	<i>Rivista di Filologia e di Istruzione Classica</i>
<i>RhM</i>	<i>Rheinisches Museum für Philologie</i>
<i>RHR</i>	<i>Revue de l'histoire des Religions</i>
<i>RIC</i>	Mattingly, H. and Sydenham, E. A. 1936. <i>The Roman Imperial Coinage</i> , Volume 4, Part 1: <i>Pertinax to Geta</i> . London: Spink and Son, Ltd.
<i>SHA</i>	<i>Scriptores Historiae Augustae</i>
<i>SIFC</i>	<i>Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica</i>
<i>TAPhA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>

Introduction

Approaching the De natura animalium

The personality (a historical fiction, 202 CE)

It is April in the tenth year of the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus. All Rome celebrates not just the *decennalia*, the festival and games marking this ten-year anniversary, but also the emperor's return to the city at last after five years in the East. The theatre is packed, a buzzing hive full of pleasure-loving drones. The whole city has turned out. There seem to be as many Greeks, Jews, Egyptians, and Syrians as Romans – Latin is nearly drowned out in a cacophony of Eastern tongues. It's almost time for the day's big event. A great structure stands in the center of the arena, built to look like a boat. What's in store? Despite the mounting anticipation for the spectacle in the arena, all eyes eventually seek out the imperial box for a glimpse of the emperor with his family, a reassuring image, all at home finally and presiding over their people. Do they feel at home, so far from Africa and Syria?

There is the emperor, bearded, distinguished, a gold crown upon his head. He sits, standing only rarely and for short periods of time. The gout in his legs must be hurting him. They say that's the reason he declined when the senate offered him a triumph for his victories: he didn't want to have to stand the whole time in the chariot as the triumphal procession wound its way through the streets to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol. But we have him to thank for the new temple in honor of Lord Sarapis.

And there beside him on his left is his wife and the mother of the Augusti, Julia Domna. Domina Domna? I hear that her name actually means "black" in her native tongue. She likes to talk about religion and philosophy – who doesn't these days? But it's in her blood: her ancestors are priests descended from the sun, god of us all. Heliogabal I think they call him in Syria. Well, Helios is smiling today. It's blazing unseasonably hot here in the arena. Philostratus stands beside the Empress. He's proud to

be there, you can tell. Proud as a peacock. I suppose that could have been me. That's what they tell me, anyway. But that kind of display is not for me. What is he whispering into the empress' ear? And there are the Syrian ladies waiting on the empress, the other Julias, Maesa and Sohaemias, her sister and niece, I think.

On the other side of the emperor are his two sons, Antoninus and Geta, the lion's cubs. Energetic boys, active. They say their natures are different. The younger one is quieter, more bookish, inquisitive. The older one has a cruel streak. Others say they're both equally wild. They fight. No surprise there. Brothers do fight. Antoninus, the one they call Caracalla, is fourteen now and has a new bride, Fulvia Plautilla. Her father, the Prefect Caius Fulvius Plautianus, the emperor's beloved kinsman and dearest friend since they were boys together in Libya, sits nearby, further off to the side and behind.

Felicitas saeculi, "good fortune of the age," as it says on the coins with the family portrait. Happy family. Or not. I hear rumors. But you don't need rumors to know that someone's always plotting and maneuvering in the palace. It's dangerous. Their talons are concealed. But kings don't listen to wise men like they should.

Some words pass between the emperor and Plautianus, and the emperor is evidently pleased at the spectacle that Plautianus offered earlier in the day: sixty wild boars displayed and then hunted down to the delight of the crowds. There was an Indian *korokotas*, too, a curious mix – by some divine mystery – of tiger, lion, dog, and fox. Some say this was the creature's debut in Rome, but I've seen one before. We also had to witness the slaughter of an elephant. There was a time when serving up that creature for death in the arena was a risky business, as likely to elicit tears as much as cheers from the spectators. But those days are gone. This crowd ate it up.

It's time for the big event now. A group of slaves approach the boat in the center of the arena, then they climb aboard and there is some pulling of ropes. The walls of the boat collapse and then – look! – bears, lionesses, panthers, lions, ostriches, wild asses, bison . . . I can't count them all. Marvelous. I want to inspect them more closely. Many in the crowd don't know what they're looking at. But *we* know their Greek names and I'm ready to show off and swap stories with the friends standing beside me, all in immaculate Attic Greek, of course. The crocodile reminds me: I must stop by the temple of Isis in the Campus Martius to ask a question of the priest and the attendants. We haven't seen anything like this since they caught that giant sea monster in the harbor of Augustus a few years ago.

They made a cast of its massive body and hauled it into the hunting theatre; when they opened it up, fifty bears came tumbling out – wonderful. But this tops the sea monster and the bears. This has variety.

But the hunters are marching in now, and they draw their swords, and the cheering of the crowd is deafening. They call this hunting. It's easy to track them down when they're trapped in the arena.

I've had enough of the blood and the crowd. There's six more days of this.

I will write up the day's spectacle for my Bithynian friend to include in his history. Back to the peace and quiet of my study and my books, my true love, my passion. My friends keep asking me the old question if I should get married. But I like not having the distraction and all the trouble that comes with family. Not very Roman of me, I know. But it does make me sound like a philosopher. Anyway, my real friends keep me company.

Between the statue and the library

Claudius Aelianus was born in Praeneste, about 35 km east of Rome, between 161 and 177 CE, conservatively reckoned.¹ This means that Aelian was born during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and grew up and came of age during the reign of Commodus.² In April of 202 CE, the date of the *decennalia* of Septimius Severus, he was a grown man between the ages of 25 and 41. The year that Severus died (211 CE), Aelian was between 34 and 50 years old, and in that same year Caracalla killed his brother Geta and became sole emperor of Rome. Aelian was between 41 and 57 years old when Elagabalus, son of Julia Sohaemias and grand-nephew of Julia Domna, became emperor in 218 CE. A student of the sophist Pausanias, who held the chair of rhetoric at Rome from c. 190–197 CE,³ Aelian became

¹ This date is established from the notice in Philostratus' biography of Aelian in the *Lives of the Sophists*, where we learn that Aelian lived more than sixty years. That work also provides a *terminus post quem* for Aelian's death: the assassination of Elagabalus in 222 CE (presuming, of course, that that emperor and not Caracalla was the target of his invective, the *Indictment of the Little Woman*). Publication of the *Lives of the Sophists*, the *terminus ante quem* for Aelian's death, may itself be dated to between 230 and 238 CE (its addressee, Gordian I, was consul for the second time in 229–230 CE and died as emperor in 238 CE; Jones 2002 has, however, argued that Philostratus' addressee was Gordianus III, dating the VS between 242 and 244). By a conservative reckoning, then, Aelian died between 222 and 238 CE. Counting backward "more than sixty years" conservatively (i.e. 61 years) from 222 yields a birth date for Aelian in 161; counting backward from 238 yields a birth date in 177. Cf. Kindstrand 1998: 2597 and Schettino 2005: 283–284.

² There is even a fleeting reminiscence of Commodus at fr. 114 Hercher, 118 Domingo-Forasté.

³ Philostr. VS 594; on the dating of Pausanias with regard to his tenure of the chair of rhetoric at Athens, see Avotins 1975: 319–324.

famous for his expertise and fluency in Attic Greek, the premier literary language of his age. Aelian had official duties as a priest and he was a distinguished man of letters in Rome. He was the author of a collection of *Rustic Letters*; a collection of narratives *On the Character of Animals*; another collection called the *Varied History*; two religious works, *On Providence* and *On Manifestations of the Divine*; a political invective against the emperor Elagabalus that he called *Indictment of the Little Woman*; and possibly some epigrams that were once inscribed on *hermai*, or commemorative stone columns, that decorated the grounds of what may have been his suburban villa in Rome.⁴ There may have been more.⁵ He was thought for a time to be a member of the literary “circle” of the empress Julia Domna,⁶ but the notion of a formalized “circle” at the imperial court has now been sufficiently dismissed, and there is anyway no evidence for Aelian’s involvement in such a salon.⁷ Aelian was nevertheless fortunate to be admired in his own lifetime, and his literary works – all in Greek – would be influential for a thousand years and more in the Roman world.⁸

This book is concerned primarily with Aelian’s collection *On the Character of Animals*, known in Latin as *De natura animalium* (henceforth *NA*). Although the title of Aelian’s book is similar to the title of a book by Aristotle, the *Historia animalium*, Aelian and Aristotle could not be more different. Aelian is not a philosopher, but a moralist and a literary stylist. Whereas Aristotle’s work was part of a larger, rigorously intellectual project of classification and causal explanation, Aelian wrote a different kind of natural history, a scholarly compendium suiting the literary tastes of his age and appealing directly to the pleasures of reading. When Aristotle inquires into the unique nature of the elephant, asp, or octopus, he asks what specific principles determine the development and behavior of each. Aelian instead tells stories. We hear of a troupe of elephants in Rome that could dance and perform pantomimes. We hear about an Egyptian boy beloved by an asp that spoke to him in dreams. And we hear about a monstrous octopus that

⁴ *Inscriptiones Graecae* 14.1183. See Bowie 1989 and Wilson 1997: 2–3.

⁵ On a fragmentary inscription possibly by Aelian, see Moretti 1978. The *Rustic Letters*, the *NA*, and the poems (at least the ones that we know of) have survived. Much of the *VH* has survived in a fragmentary version. *On Providence* and *On Manifestations of the Divine* (if they were indeed separate works) survive only in a few fragments. The *Indictment of the Little Woman* is a lost work, its title known only from Philostratus’ biography of Aelian in the *Lives of the Sophists*, though some fragments by Aelian may well be extracts from the political diatribe (see *Appendix*).

⁶ Münscher 1907: 477 and Platnauer 1965: 144–145.

⁷ Bowersock 1969: 101–109 and Whitmarsh 2007: 31–34.

⁸ See Kindstrand 1986 and 1998: 2990–2993.

lived off the coast of Italy. The pleasure of reading draws us in, seducing us. But there is also an edge to many of the stories, as Aelian's honeyed prose becomes a medium for provoking his readers' contemplation of the failures of human morality. Generally disenchanted with human society, Aelian is a personality at odds with the world of Severan Rome. A crucial mechanism for seduction, making the reader vulnerable for Aelian's moral criticism, is the work's rejection of systematic classification. There is no order to the sequence of chapters within the seventeen books of the *NA*, and that disorder was deliberate.

Each chapter of the *NA* offers itself as a polished literary fragment, but there are no obvious clues and no overarching narrative voice telling us how to put those fragments together, to make meaningful connections from one chapter to the next. Am I to read the book from cover to cover, as a linear activity, experiencing each chapter in approximately the same sequence that Aelian wrote or arranged them?⁹ Or am I to pick and choose at random or flip back and forth between different chapters in a semantic drift, browsing through the *NA* as if it were a kind of hypertextual jungle?¹⁰ The *NA* – a text whose “openness” is representative of the period's anthologizing aesthetic¹¹ – accommodates a variety of approaches.

The anecdotal prose fragment, Aelian's favored literary form, raises interesting questions. While pleasing and provocative in and of themselves, Aelian's fragments – *qua* fragments, molecular bits of a literary culture¹² – may be hooked up, fitted into, and *used* in a variety of different contexts. They are stories or factoids ready to be swapped at a moment's notice, the perfect moment, in a display of erudite learning. And stories about nature and animals were the particularly favored gems of *paideia*, the sophistic education of the Imperial age, as we see clearly from the evidence of contemporary narratives. In Achilles Tatius' romance, the hero-narrator Kleitophon uses his knowledge of animal mating habits and the power of attraction in nature to seduce his beloved Leukippe, and Kleitophon's slave-accomplice Saturos engages in a battle of wits with the troublesome attendant Konops by manipulating animal fables. The characters of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*, too, take every opportunity to share their wisdom about animals and nature. The same writer's *Eikones* neatly illustrates the intense contemporary fascination with the intertwining of human morality and animal characters when his sophistic narrator

⁹ On the ordering of chapters in the *NA*, see GLR xx–xxi. ¹⁰ Thus Sharrock 2000: 5.

¹¹ On the “open” work, see Eco 1989. ¹² Cf. Parker 2008: 116 and DuBois 2010: 40.

offers a description of a painting of Aesop surrounded by his *muthoi*: the fox leads a chorus of actors with a combination of human and animal bodies.¹³

The accumulated lore and traditions about animals therefore represent a discourse, a vast storehouse of fragmentary knowledge, ready to be drawn upon when needed by the practitioners of sophistic skill. Aelian even describes his collection of animal narratives as a *keimêlion*, some treasure stored up as valuable. The structural variety of the work, an apparently random jumble of anecdotal fragments ready for the sophist's use, seems to anticipate the stylistic disorder favored by Roland Barthes in his own lyrical collection of fragments from the discourse of the lover: "Throughout any love life, figures occur to the lover without any order, for on each occasion they depend on an (internal or external) accident. Confronting each of these incidents (what 'befalls' him), the amorous subject draws on the reservoir (the thesaurus?) of figures, depending on the needs, the injunctions, or the pleasures of his image-repertoire."¹⁴ Barthes and Aelian both conjure the fragmentary nature of discourse, but whereas Barthes emphasizes its "non-syntagmatic, non-narrative" quality, Aelian attempts to exert a centripetal force to discursive fragmentation: the disparate pieces of the discourse on animals are held together by repeated references to some transcendent divine power and by the insistent positing of a speaking, assembling, authorizing "I." Thus, the *NA*, not unlike the "false multiplicity" described by Deleuze and Guattari,¹⁵ reflects only the illusion of the chaos and disorder of discourse unmoored from a contextualizing subject. The morally assertive and reassertive "I" of the work's preface and epilogue, as well as the text's continual return to "nature's divine mystery," strongly suggest an identity or vector seeking a way through the tangle.

From a different perspective, though, the subject *is* the tangle itself, if we accept that what Aelian depicts in the *NA* has more in common with Foucault's concept of the subject as a "composite form" than with the Cartesian subject of modern philosophy.¹⁶ Aelian's assertive and reassertive "I" may then be understood as an effect that arises from the intersection of the multiple discourses on animals, ethnicity, marriage, family life, philosophy, exoticism, sex, pleasure, the body, kingship, women, etc. Aelian's book

¹³ Ach. Tat. 1.15–19, 2.21–22; Philostr. *VA* 2.2.1–2, 2.6, 2.11.1–14.2, 2.15.1, 2.16, 3.1.2, 3.6–9, 3.46–49, 6.10.6, 6.25; and Philostr. *Im.* 1.3. On animals in Achilles Tatius and Philostratus, see Morales 2004, Flinterman 1995, and Demoen and Praet 2009. On the anecdote in literary culture of the second and third centuries, see Goldhill 2009a. On Philostratus, the author of the *VA* and *Im.*, see Bowie 2009. On animal fables in Greek and Roman culture, see Van Dijk 1997, Henderson 2001, and Kurke 2010.

¹⁴ Barthes 1979: 6–7.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 16.

¹⁶ Bonnafous-Boucher 2009: 86.

is therefore not just a figure for the disappearance of the author amid the fragmentation and disorder of a literary tradition, but a compelling illustration of the tenuousness of a singular authority as it struggles to assert itself, constantly at risk of being overwhelmed by the chorus of voices from the past.¹⁷ König and Whitmarsh have rightly stressed that Aelian's *NA* and other such compilatory texts are "virtuoso" performances of "mastery in the spheres of research, synthesis and exposition. It is not that the author recedes in such texts, more that the role of the author is reconceived: new virtues are located in the arts of editing and the organisation of pre-existing units of knowledge."¹⁸ This is generally true, but Aelian's countercultural literary persona and his anxiety over his place in society as well as in the canon make the question of the "receding author" a salient point of the *NA*. To put it another way, the *NA* is suspended between the individual and the multiplicity, the statue and the library.

Aelian's turn away from a successful career as a public speaker, denying himself a life appearing in imperial palaces, is a sign that he has yielded to his own becoming minor in the sophistic world of Severan Rome. I use the phrase "becoming minor" here in the sense meant by Deleuze and Guattari and described by Leonard Lawlor as an "affect of shame at being a man, at being human all too human, with our oppressions, our clichés, our opinions, and our desires."¹⁹ Aelian is not the figure speaking at the center of the auditorium. He is off to the side of the crowd, or alone in his study, writing. His sense of self-separation is reinforced by his choice of subject: having become minor, Aelian subsequently moves closer to becoming animal, and hence to becoming worldly.²⁰ He may not be a slave, as he proudly asserts in the epilogue of the *NA*, but he nonetheless identifies with the "irrational" beasts, the most abject figures of the arena.²¹ And he begins writing like an animal.²² He wants to speak with foreign tongues, with animal tongues, and to make animal sounds.²³ His book invites the polyphony of the world. He wants to write not the grand, totalizing

¹⁷ Cf. Gunderson 2009: 6. ¹⁸ König and Whitmarsh 2007: 28. ¹⁹ Lawlor 2008: 174.

²⁰ On "becoming minor" and "becoming animal" see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 233–309. On a critique of Deleuze and Guattari and on "becoming worldly," see Haraway 2008: 27–30, 41–42. On "becoming" (γίγνεσθαι) as a metamorphosis that need not be physical or entail a change of appearance, see Buxton 2009: 23.

²¹ For Aelian's humanization of the animal, animalization of the human, and problematization of the slave, cf. Agamben 2004: 37–38.

²² See Lawlor 2008 on writing as the crucial signifier of a successful "becoming animal" in the sense described by Deleuze and Guattari. On the intertwining of the theme of slavery, animal narratives, and transgressive/transformative writing in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and the *Vita Aesopi*, see Finkelpearl 2003.

²³ *NA* 5.51.

narrative of Roman imperial Hellenism, but Hellenism as translation. The book is a meadow or garland. But it is also the twisting and turning of tunnels dug by subterranean creatures, potentially undermining established structures.²⁴ It is true that Aelian imposes a conservative morality on many of the animal narratives that he presents, but this voice should not be considered the final moral authority of the *NA*. The hermeneutic “I” that seeks a meaningful way through the disorder of the text opens itself up to the possibility of its own transformation. The reader who delves deeply into Aelian’s book confronts issues of culture, philosophy, divinity, gender, desire, and power – the stakes are high. Aelian’s contemporaries may have praised him for maintaining a conservative Roman character (was there a statue of Aelian in Rome?). But Aelian’s text postulates also a reader who will fly from that conservative authority and burrow her way into the library, perhaps through some surprising point of entry, seeking metamorphosis.

Points of entry

In [Chapter 1](#), I consider the evidence for Aelian’s countercultural persona, most significantly what the author has to say about and for himself in the crucial preface and epilogue to the *NA*. I also look at Philostratus’ biography of Aelian in the *Lives of the Sophists* and the notice in the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia known as the *Souda*. Reading this evidence closely, I address important questions about Aelian’s self-positioning within the ongoing philosophical debate about the relationship between animals and humans, his ethnic background, and the claim in the *Souda* that he served as high priest.

Aelian’s *Rustic Letters* are the subject of [Chapter 2](#). In reading these finely crafted literary epistles I focus on the rustic subjectivity of Aelian’s Athenian farmers and how they define themselves by their relation to animal life, sometimes reaffirming the division between human and animal and at other times blurring that distinction. Aelian’s interest in the intertwining of human and animal in the Athenian countryside as well as the fragmentary collection as a literary genre reflects similar interests in Aelian’s other works.

The structural disorder of the *NA* is the subject of [Chapter 3](#). The aesthetic of *poikilia* – “variety,” “dappling,” “polychromaticism” – was well established in Greek literature by the third century CE. But Aelian’s affinity for *poikilia* is attended by anxieties that his compositional style impugns both his intellectual integrity and his masculinity. I attempt to understand

²⁴ *NA* 6.43 and 16.15. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 6–7.

Aelian's defensiveness through a survey of the development of *poikilia* in prose literature from the classical period to Aelian's day and through a consideration of how he attempts to respond to his imagined critics.

In the [fourth chapter](#) I deal more deeply with the question of Aelian's Roman identity and his adoption of a Greek literary persona. The chapter begins with a close reading of the programmatic passage that begins the collection, on a curious species of philhellenic bird that dwells off the coast of Italy. I then gauge the significance of Aelian's careful distancing of himself from Roman culture in the *NA*, but also consider how he engages with two central institutions of Roman culture, namely the animal spectacle of the arena and married domestic life.

[Chapter 5](#) addresses the question of Aelian's Stoicism. After sketching the beliefs of Stoicism as understood in the third century CE, I describe how the *NA* both adheres to and departs from Stoic doctrine. Of particular interest is the tension between Stoicism (a philosophy that encourages sober, rational reflection on the natural world) and the paradoxography of Aelian's literary book of animal wonders.

Aelian's relationship to the divine, an important facet of Stoicism, is the subject of [Chapter 6](#). I look at what role animals play in the various depictions of gods and goddesses from different cultures in the *NA*. Here, too, the intersection with literature is a focus, as Aelian's most creative engagement with the divine is seen in his elaboration, his *writing* of myth, even while myth itself is problematized against an intellectual background that privileges philosophical truth.

In [Chapter 7](#), I look at Aelian's contribution to the contemporary fascination with Egypt and India, his depictions of which occur in two significant groups of roughly sequential chapters within the otherwise disordered structure of the *NA*. In the Egyptian and Indian groupings of the *NA*, the discourse on animals is tightly intertwined with cultural exoticism, and yet in many ways these exotic "other" worlds serve as a mirror for the cultural landscape of Severan Rome.

The prominence of sex and physical desire in the *NA*, as they pertain to both animals and humans, is the subject of [Chapter 8](#). After a detailed consideration of the complex sexual morality of the *NA*, I deal with Aelian's recurring interest in transgender phenomena and the intersex bodies of certain animals, subjects relevant to Aelian's own gendered persona in the *NA*. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the collection's many narratives of interspecies eroticism, especially those potentially unsettling stories where humans are depicted in the erotic embrace of nonhuman animals.

In [Chapter 9](#), I address Aelian's treatment of kingship in the *NA* through an analysis of how he manipulates the symbolic associations of bees, lions, and eagles. Even if there is no explicit engagement with Severan politics in the *NA*, we know from his diatribe against Elagabalus that Aelian was interested in the figure of the emperor, and his chapters on the kings of animals give us some insight into Aelian's political thought. The chapter concludes with a look at how different animals – goose, swan, octopus, and crow – deal with tyranny and how the political strategies of those animals might have been relevant to a writer of natural history in the age of the Severans.

In the final chapter, I move beyond the *NA* and consider the *Varied History* as Aelian's attempt to engage more directly with human morality. In the two longest chapters of the *VH*, Aelian offers elaborate narratives of two women, the Persian concubine Aspasia of Phokaia and Atalante, the virgin huntress of myth. This turn towards complex, compelling women reflects Aelian's ongoing interest in a critique of masculine ethics in Greco-Roman culture of the third century CE. But I contend that these stories also prompt reflection about what a different ethics would look like and what different kinds of subjects it would produce.

The independent intellectual

Although the *NA* offers itself as an assemblage of fragmented voices, a strong, self-assured voice nevertheless asserts and reasserts itself at the beginning and end of the work. The collection's luxurious, expansive *poikilia* is thus framed by the image of the author as a singular literary persona. And so, before delving into the rich collection of diversions in the *NA*, it is necessary first to become acquainted as best we can with Claudius Aelianus himself, or at least the rhetorically engineered image of the author that Aelian projects.

The preface and epilogue of the *NA* do not offer much in the way of an autobiography. Instead of details of birth and parentage, notices of family, friends, associates, patrons, students, and the like, what we get is an impressionistic intellectual self-portrait. This self-portrait is not as a mirror of reality – it doesn't tell us who the author *really* is – but rather a constructed literary persona that can give us some sense of what kind of personality third-century readers might have reasonably believed to be behind a book like the *NA*. The writer Philostratus, one of Aelian's contemporaries, provides some important biographical details in his famous book, the *Lives of the Sophists*, and there are also some tantalizing details in the tenth-century *Souda* lexicon. More will be said below about the life of Aelian in Philostratus' biography and about the brief entry in the *Souda*. To begin, however, it is appropriate to consider what Aelian has to say about himself and his work in his own words.

Self-portraiture in the preface and epilogue of the *NA*

Why animals? Aelian is explicit at the very beginning of the prologue that his fascination with animals arises from their numerous, curiously human-like qualities.¹ Human wisdom and justice, our inclination to care

¹ On Aelian's self-presentation in the preface and epilogue of the *NA*, see also Stamm 2003: 32–37 and Whitmarsh 2007: 48–49.

for our young and our parents, our ability to provide for ourselves, and to protect ourselves from attack – these, says Aelian, are perhaps not surprising (παράδοξον ἴσως οὐδέν, *pr.*, p. 1, lines 5–6). Humans, after all, are endowed with reason (λόγος). The fact that animals, however, creatures that are supposed to lack reason (τὰ ἄλογα), do in fact have a share in virtue (ἀρετή) – “this,” says Aelian, “is indeed truly amazing” (τοῦτο ἥδη μέγα, 11–12). Animals are interesting, in other words, because they are not mere beasts, contrary to human classification of them as such. They are, rather, endowed by nature (κατὰ φύσιν, 9) with all of the qualities that make humans human, and it is for that reason that they deserve our attention.²

Aelian therefore begins by evoking a debate prominent in philosophical circles since the Hellenistic period. On one side of the debate stood the Stoics, who, despite their belief in the all-encompassing power of nature, argued that animals did not possess *logos*, the capacity for reason that characterized humans and set them apart from the rest of nature’s creations. On the other side of the debate were Platonists who argued that animals did possess *logos* and were therefore deserving of proper treatment and consideration by humans.³ The arguments on both sides are articulated in the opening sequence of Plutarch’s dialogue that poses the question: *Which Are More Clever, Land or Sea Animals?* (Πότερα τῶν ζώων φρονιμώτερα, τὰ χερσαῖα ἢ τὰ ἑνυδρᾶ, *Mor.* 959B–985C).⁴ In that dialogue, Plutarch poses a complex ethical problem: even if we should accept that animals are sentient creatures capable of the same capacity for thought and emotion as humans, will that knowledge change the way we think and behave? Aelian will not be concerned with the development of a philosophical argument as Plutarch clearly is in his dialogue. For Aelian, the mass of evidence that he collects from his scholarly activity would clearly seem to refute the position held by the Stoics.⁵ And yet for as much as Aelian celebrates the virtue of animals, he consistently refers to them in traditional language as *aloga*, “irrational creatures” or “creatures lacking *logos*.” It is therefore sometimes difficult to construe where Aelian stands in the debate on whether animals

² Cf. Philostratus’ description of Aesopic fables: “everything about human beings has been turned into a fable by Aesop, and he has given a share of *logos* to the beasts for the sake of *logos*” (Αἰσώπῳ πάντα τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐκμεμύθωται, καὶ λόγου τοῖς θηρίοις μεταδέδωκε λόγου ἕνεκεν, *Im.* 1.3.1). For the authorship of the *Imagines*, see Elsner 2009: 4.

³ Arr. *Epict.* 1.6.18–20, 16.4–5. Other *loci classici* on the debate, from Alcmaeon to Augustine, can now be found, with bibliography, in Newmyer 2011: 1–26. See also Sorabji 1993: 78–96, Gilhus 2006: 37–52, Newmyer 2006: 10–47, and Newmyer 2008. Philo’s dialogue *On Whether Dumb Animals Possess Reason* (c. 50 CE) is now extant only in Armenian translation; see Terian 1981.

⁴ This dialogue is also known by its Latin titles, *Terrestriane an aquatilia animalia sint callidiora* or *De sollertia animalium*.

⁵ See Hübner 1984: 155–156.

possess *logos*: did he conform with Stoic doctrine or not? And to what degree was Aelian influenced by other schools of philosophical thought, including Cynicism, Pythagoreanism, or even Epicureanism? I address the question of Aelian's Stoicism fully in [Chapter 5](#), but for now it suffices to say that Aelian is, like Plutarch, interested in the proper treatment of animals and the rhetorical use of animals to explore and critique human morality.

Whereas in the preface Aelian begins by positioning himself within a long philosophical debate about animals, he begins the epilogue by addressing his seemingly inexhaustible capacity for scholarly compilation. Here he proudly declares that “passion for learning, a passion that is both an intimate companion and part of my nature, inflames me” (ἔρως με σοφίας ὁ σύνοικός τε καὶ ὁ συμφυῆς ἐξέκαυσεν, ep., p. 430, lines 7–8).⁶ Aelian is of course here playing with the very notion of *philosophia*, suggesting that he is a philosopher, or *philosophos*, in the most literal sense, i.e. a “lover of wisdom.” But that he does not use the words *philosophia* or *philosophos* here is an implication of difference from that pursuit and title respectively. *Erôs*, the love by which Aelian claims to be figuratively burnt, is a very different thing, after all, from *philia*, the love that inspires the philosopher. *Erôs* is more intense, more passionate, transgressive even, producing at times a dangerous madness, as he himself shows us in his many descriptions of nature's more erotic creatures. It matters too that Aelian represents this *erôs* not as an external, corrupting force, but internally as an integral part of his character, part of his human nature. Aelian's varied relationship with and conceptions of *erôs*, relevant to the gods, humans, and all creatures living in the natural world, form an important component of this study.

Aelian then proceeds to distance himself from a segment of Rome's intellectual community:

οὐκ ἄγνωθόν δὲ ἄρα ὅτι καὶ τῶν εἰς χρήματα ὀρώντων ὁξὺ καὶ τεθηγμένων ἐς τιμὰς τε καὶ δυνάμεις τινὲς καὶ πᾶν τὸ φιλόδοξον δι' αἰτίας ἔξουσιν, εἰ τὴν ἑμαυτοῦ σχολὴν κατεθέμην καὶ εἰς ταῦτα, ἔξον καὶ ὠφρῶσθαι καὶ ἐν ταῖς αὐλαῖς ἐξετάζεσθαι καὶ ἐπὶ μέγα προήκειν πλούτου. (NA, ep., p. 430, lines 8–12)

And I am not unaware indeed that even of those who have a sharp eye for money and who have been whetted for honors and influence and every ambition, some will find fault if I set aside my free time even for these things [the study of animals], when it is possible to raise my brow in arrogance and to appear in palaces and to come into great wealth.

⁶ Cf. Aristid. 1.27.26, 2.230.13, 2.403.27.

Aelian sketches a vivid picture of Rome's professional intellectuals as greedy and jealous, their eyes always scanning for new sources of income and a step up the social ladder. He sees them as learned weapons, sharpened (τεθηγμένων) like swords or spear-points for advancement in the petty skirmishes that constitute their careers. Aelian implies that, by contrast, his scholarly pursuits are not motivated by a desire for notoriety or for monetary gain⁷ – occupying his free time in the pursuit of the wisdom of animals is not so ambitious, though writing a seventeen-book miscellany suggests its own kind of ambition. Aelian's peers not only disdain his obsession with animal lore: they resent that he himself has disdained the opportunities for fame, wealth, and influence that they so obviously crave. Though he defines himself by an intellectual *erôs* and not by the more sober love of wisdom that characterizes the ideal philosopher, Aelian's self-portrait here appeals to the traditional persona of the philosopher. Extending back to Socrates, this character type is a social pariah whose deeper understanding of the world leads him to pursue his own unique path in life, with the result that he becomes an exceptional figure, fascinating but also incomprehensible to those around him. Against this background, Aelian would have his readers suppose it odd that so talented a figure would concern himself with foxes, lizards, beetles, snakes, and lions: "I have no desire to be numbered among these wealthy men and to be measured against them" (ἀλλὰ οὐ μοι φίλον σὺν τοῖσδε τοῖς πλουσίοις ἀριθμεῖσθαι καὶ πρὸς ἐκείνους ἐξετάζεσθαι, 18–19).

What he does desire, on the contrary, is to be ranked among the wise poets (ποιηταὶ σοφοί, *NA* ep., p. 430, lines 19–20) and among the men clever at inspecting and examining nature's secrets (ἄνδρες φύσεως ἀπόρρητα ἰδεῖν τε ἅμα καὶ κατασκέψασθαι δεινοί, 20–21) and among the historians who go the farthest in their inquiry (συγγραφεῖς τῆς πείρας ἐς τὸ μήκιστον προελθόντες, 21). For achieving that kind of glory, he says, he is a better counsel for himself than the judgment of the multitude. Of particular interest in this passage is the way in which Aelian figures himself as appealing to multiple literary traditions at once. He is not a philosopher, for his own love of wisdom is more intense than that of philosophy, and yet he also depicts himself as fulfilling certain aspects of the philosopher's character type, especially in terms of his refusal to live according to the normative standards of the community. The *NA* is certainly not poetry, but Aelian would like to associate himself with the ranks of the great poets,

⁷ Cf. frs. 26 and 27 Hercher; 29 and 30 Domingo-Forasté, perhaps from the prefatory remarks of one of Aelian's lost works.

and a group of six epigrams from a pair of herms of Homer and Menander attest to Aelian's poetic aspirations: discovered near the *Porta Trigemina* in Rome, the herms possibly decorated the grounds of Aelian's suburban villa.⁸ The reference to men who are clever at looking at and examining nature's secrets suggests writers of natural science, among whom Aristotle looms large. And while the *NA* does concern itself with a display of the animal kingdom in all its varieties, the curiosities and delightful narratives of Aelian's book depart significantly from Aristotle's more objective, analytical project. Third, Aelian would like to rank himself among the great historians, but the *NA* hardly follows the pattern of the famous historical narratives that Aelian probably has in mind. This multifaceted approach, appreciative of and combining multiple literary traditions, is consistent with the overall variegated structure of the *NA*, about which I will say more in [Chapter 3](#). And so while Aelian clearly has literary ambitions, he distinguishes them from the ambitions of his contemporaries: "For I would prefer the survival of at least one bit of my educated learning rather than the celebrated money and possessions of the very wealthy" (βουλοίμην γὰρ ἂν μάθημα ἔν γοῦν πεπαιδευμένον περιγενέσθαι μοι ἢ τὰ ῥεδόμενα τῶν πάντων πλουσίων χρήματ' αἶμα καὶ κτήματα, 24–26). If, however, Aelian did in fact own a villa just outside of Rome (the evidence for which rests purely on the assertion of Fulvio Orsini and Pirro Ligorio),⁹ then that would be a good indication of just how wealthy the writer from Praeneste was.

After an impassioned defense of the compositional methodology of the *NA* (which I address in [Chapter 3](#)), Aelian then voices a personal aside about the living creatures that he has taken as his subject:

εἰ δὲ τοῖς θηρατικοῖς καὶ ἐν ζῶον εὐρεῖν δοκεῖ πῶς εὐεργμία, ἀλλὰ τό γε τῶν τοσοῦτων οὐ τὰ ἴχνη, οὐδὲ τὰ μέλη συλλαβεῖν ἐγὼ φημί γενναῖον, ἀλλ' ὅποσα ἡ φύσις ἔδωκε τε αὐτοῖς καὶ ὅσων ἡξίωσεν ἀνιχνεῦσαι. (*NA*, ep., p. 431, lines 12–15)

And although to hunters it seems good luck to find even one creature, nevertheless I myself declare it noble to catch not the tracks or the limbs of so many creatures, but to track down as much as nature has granted to them and of how much nature thought them worthy.

Just as in the first section of the epilogue Aelian set himself apart from contemporary writers and public speakers, so here Aelian contrasts his scholarly activity with the hunt, an activity long popular in antiquity, with

⁸ Bowie 1989: 244–247. On the references to Homer in the *NA*, see Kindstrand 1976.

⁹ Bowie 1989: 244 and Wilson 1997: 2–3.

an equally long tradition of literary representation in Greek and Roman culture. Aelian's statement evokes the lasting influence of hunting manuals like Xenophon's classic *Kunêgetikos*, Arrian's work of the same title from the second century CE, and even the Oppianic *Kunêgetika* by a Syrian poet contemporary with Aelian.¹⁰ All these works, championing the hunt as the leisure sport par excellence of the noble class, also tied hunting to ethics and the development of masculine ideals, first in the Greek world of the fourth century BCE and then in the Hellenized Roman world of the Hadrianic period and later under Caracalla. Here, however, Aelian suggests a bold alternative: for the antiquarian scholar, hunting down surprising rare facts in the library is more noble than tracking down real animals only to destroy them. Aelian was not alone in the Imperial period in voicing such concern over man's predatory leisure sport, and yet his position must be seen against a cultural background in which the hunt not only represented the refined activity of an elite class, but also provided the model for the *venationes*, the staged slaughter of wild beasts in the arena for the delight of the Roman masses throughout the empire. This leads to Aelian's closing remarks, where he asserts, "I praise the piety of irrational creatures, but I refute the piety of humans" (ζῶων μὲν εὐσέβειαν ἀλόγων ᾗδομεν, ἀνθρώπων δὲ εὐσέβειαν ἐλέγχομεν, p. 432, lines 1–2). Inextricably bound up with and perhaps even unwittingly celebratory of urban Roman culture of the early third century CE, Aelian nevertheless also fashions a literary persona that is critical of that same cultural milieu.

Evidence from Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists*

Moving from Aelian's self-presentation in the preface and epilogue of the *NA*, it is necessary to consider the only other contemporary source on Aelian: Philostratus' biographical sketch from the *Lives of the Sophists*.¹¹ The first thing we learn is that Aelian "was Roman (Ῥωμαῖος μὲν), but he spoke and wrote Attic Greek (ἡττίκιζε δέ) just like the Athenians who dwell in the middle of their land" (*VS* 624). Philostratus says nothing explicitly about whether Aelian was a former slave of non-Roman ethnic background and had acquired his Roman name and identity from his master, or whether Aelian was in fact born from a Roman family. The name

¹⁰ On the significance of the Oppianic *Kunêgetika* within Severan culture, see Bartley 2003 and Whitby 2007. See also Chapter 3.

¹¹ On the place of Philostratus and the *Lives of the Sophists* in the culture and literature of the period, see especially Anderson 1986; Swain 1996: 380–400; Johnson 1997: 4–15; Whitmarsh 2001: 188–190, 238–244; Bowie 2009; Rife 2009; Schmitz 2009; Sidebottom 2009; and Civiletti 2002.

Aelianus is well attested during the imperial period,¹² and its derivation from the name Aelius suggests affiliation with the *gens Aelia*, possibly via citizenship granted by the emperor Hadrian (Publius Aelius Hadrianus) in the second century. But this says little about Aelian's ethnic background, a question that has posed a problem especially in recent scholarship.

Kindstrand supposes from the evidence of the *Souda* (see below) that Aelian may have had Greek descent and took the name Claudius because he was a freedman formerly belonging to the family of the Claudii. But this is purely a conjecture, and Kindstrand himself is forced to admit that we know nothing of Aelian's descent;¹³ alternatively, the name Claudius Aelianus may be an indication that Aelian was born into the *gens Aelia* and was adopted into the family of the Claudii. Schettino, meanwhile, has provocatively imagined a mixed Greco-Egyptian or Hellenized Egyptian background for Aelian primarily on the basis of his interest in Ptolemaic Egypt and in Egyptian religion.¹⁴ Aelian himself is not exactly forthcoming on the topic of his ethnic and cultural identity. Though he refuses to address it explicitly in the *NA*, there are two enticing hints in the *VH*. In the midst of a catalogue recounting famous teachers and their disciples from Greek myth and history, Aelian prefaces his inclusion of luminary Romans with an apology: "so that I might make mention also of those close to me no less close than the Greeks are close to me (and they too matter to me, if, after all, I am Roman)" (ἵνα δὲ [μοι] καὶ τῶν ἐμοὶ προσηκόντων οὐδὲν ἥττον ἥπερ καὶ οἱ Ἕλληνες προσήκουσι μνήσωμαι (διαφέρει δέ μοι καὶ τούτων, εἴ γε Ῥωμαῖός εἰμι, *VH* 12.25). The point is not just that Aelian thinks

¹² In Latin literature we find: Mart. 11.40, 12.24; Suet. *Aug.* 51.2 (Aemilius Aelianus Cordubensis); Tac. *Hist.* 4.53 (Plautius Aelianus pontifex), *Ann.* 14.41 (Pompeius Aelianus); Scriptores Historiae Augustae *Maximus* 17.2 (Celsus Aelianus consul [dubious]); Ammianus Marcellinus 18.9.3, 19.9.2 (Aelianus Comes); and Eutropius 9.13 and Aurelius Victor, *De Caes.* 89 (the late third-century rebel Aelianus). The Greek sources for Aeliani of the Imperial period are: Galen, *De musculorum dissectione ad tirones* 18b.926, 927, 935, 986 Kühn (Aelianus Meccius; see also Ps.-Galen, *De theriaca ad Pamphilianum* 14.299 Kühn); Cassius Dio 66.3.4 (Lucius Lamia Aelianus; see also Phlegon, *De mirabilibus* 9.1.4 Giannini), 68.3.3ff. (Casperius Aelianus; see also Philostr. *VA* 7.16–40); Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.30.2 (Aelianus, a bishop named in the letter excommunicating and deposing Paul of Samosata in 269 CE). In addition to our author, there were at least two literary Aeliani: Aelian the Tacitian and Aelian the Platonist (fragments of whose commentary on the *Timaeus* were wrongly included in Domingo-Forasté's edition of our Aelian's fragments). There are also eleven Aeliani in the consular lists, all from the first three centuries of the Common Era: Ti. Plautius Silvanus Aelianus (suffect, 45), Ti. Plautius Silvanus Aelianus II (suffect, 74), L. Aelius Lamia Plautius Aelianus (suffect, 80), L. Roscius Aelianus Maecius Celer (suffect, 100), L. Fundanius Lamia Aelianus (consul, 116), Cn. Papirius Aelianus Aemilius Tuscillus (suffect, 135), L. Roscius Aelianus (suffect, 157), Cn. Papirius Aelianus (suffect, 157), Cn. Papirius Aelianus (consul, 184), L. Roscius Aelianus Paculus (consul, 187), L. Roscius Aelianus Paculus Salvius Iulianus (consul, 223). No Aeliani appear on the consular lists after 223.

¹³ Kindstrand 1998: 2957. ¹⁴ Schettino 2005: 304–307.

Lucullus, Maecenas, Cicero, and Augustus are worthy heirs to the glorious tradition of Greek wisdom; equally important is that Aelian feels the need to mark a difference, that the inclusion of Romans within this modest catalogue requires any explanation at all. Note also Aelian's conditional acknowledgment of his Roman identity: "if, after all, I am a Roman." In a later chapter, Aelian offers a catalogue of admirable Greek and Roman women; of the Roman women, he says, "I was able to mention even others, but I do not want to mention few of the Greeks, and to inundate them with the names of Romans, so that someone does not think that I am indulging myself because of my fatherland" (ἐδυνάμην δὲ εἰπεῖν καὶ ἄλλας, ἀλλ' οὐ βούλομαι τῶν μὲν Ἑλλήνων εἰπεῖν ὀλίγας, ἐπικλύσαι δὲ τοῖς τῶν Ῥωμαίων ὀνόμασιν, ὥς ἂν μὴ μέ τις δοκοίη χαρίζεσθαι ἑμαυτῷ διὰ τὴν πατρίδα, *VH* 14.45). Aelian felt that he had to be careful of offending the Hellenophile sensibilities of his audience. Shaping his Greek persona to fit his Roman character required delicacy. Caroline Stamm has nevertheless emphasized the Roman character of the *VH*, in which the characters from the Greek past and Greek myth serve repeatedly as foils for specifically Roman virtues.¹⁵ Returning to the evidence of the *Lives of the Sophists*, we note that Philostratus strongly contrasts (μὲν . . . δέ) Aelian's Roman identity with his remarkable facility in Attic, suggesting the linguistic achievement of someone whose native language was not even *koinê* Greek, but probably Latin.

Philostratus' subsequent remark, however, complicates the straightforward interpretation of Aelian as descended from a Latin-speaking Roman family and adopting a Greek persona acquired through his education. Aelian receives the praise of the biographer for his industriousness in *purifying* his language, despite that he dwelt in a city that used a language different from the one he had adopted (καθαράν φωνὴν ἐξεπόνησε πόλιν οἰκῶν ἑτέρᾳ φωνῇ χρωμένην, *VS* 624). The expression that "his labor created a language that was pure" (καθαράν φωνὴν ἐξεπόνησε)¹⁶ suggests, contrary to the above implied distinction between his use of the Roman language and an adopted Attic speech, that Aelian's first language was some form of Greek and that his rhetorical practice was an intense purification of that language to meet the standards of the premier classical dialect. We must infer from these statements of Philostratus the (at least) bilingual background of Rome in the early third century CE. Regardless of his parentage and precise ethnic background, Aelian knew enough Latin to be familiar

¹⁵ Stamm 2003: 274.

¹⁶ For the verb ἐκπονέειν as literary creation, cf. Theoc. 7.51, Longus pref. 3 (cf. 2.3.3).

with the poetry of Ennius and with the historians Livy and Cornutus, as two fragments makes clear.¹⁷ N. G. Wilson, moreover, has catalogued what he believes to be a number of instances of linguistic interference, where Latinisms have snuck into the Greek prose of both the *NA* and the *VH*, concluding that “he was a typical bilingual, not equally competent in both languages.”¹⁸ Further, as an active member of Rome’s multicultural cosmopolitan world, Aelian would also have been proficient in the *koinê* Greek of his day, with which he may well have addressed members of his household staff and any number of native Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians or other Easterners with whom he would have come into contact on a daily basis in Rome or Praeneste. As such, Aelian’s achievement in Attic Greek would have been a double achievement: the “pure” mode of his literary expression distinguished him against the background of Latin, Rome’s indigenous language, and the spoken Greek that had already become the lingua franca of the Roman empire.

In the end, then, we are left with two possibilities. Either Aelian was Roman by birth, or else he was non-Roman, meaning that he was Greek (à la Kindstrand), Egyptian (à la Schettino), or something different. Though there is no explicit self-identification as a Roman in the *NA* and though he nowhere in the *NA* cites a Latin author, Aelian nevertheless identifies himself as a Roman at least twice, though tentatively and with qualification, in the later writings of the *VH*. The possibility remains that this later self-identification as Roman was the result of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212 CE, which bestowed citizenship upon all free people living within the empire. Combined, though, with his careful distancing from Roman culture in the *NA*, I instead read Aelian’s gradual coming-out as Roman as marking the very question of his Roman identity as fraught. When we try to pin Aelian down as this or that in the *NA*, in a sense we are missing the point, which is precisely Aelian’s studied evasion of certainty. Nevertheless, even at the risk of missing Aelian’s point, I think that Aelian’s Romanness is crucial for fully understanding the *NA* within its context. I take up the question of Aelian’s Roman identity in more detail in [Chapter 4](#).

Second, Philostratus praises Aelian because, even though he was called a “sophist” by those who granted such titles, he did not believe them, nor did he flatter his own intelligence or become arrogant by the bestowal of so distinguished a title (*VS* 624). On the contrary, after careful examination of

¹⁷ On Ennius, see fr. 116 Hercher, 119 Domingo-Forasté; on Livy and Cornutus, see fr. 83 Hercher, 86 Domingo-Forasté.

¹⁸ Wilson 2006: 216.

himself and his abilities, he decided that he was unfit for public declamation, and therefore applied himself to composition, and it was for this that he was admired.¹⁹ This agrees with Aelian's own assertion in the epilogue of the *NA* that he refused the opportunity "to raise my brow in arrogance and to appear in palaces and to come into great wealth" (καὶ ὠφρυῶσθαι καὶ ἐν ταῖς αὐλαῖς ἐξετάζεσθαι καὶ ἐπὶ μέγα προήκειν πλούτου, *NA*, ep., p. 430, lines 11–12). Philostratus says that Aelian's overall rhetorical style was a simplicity (ἀφέλεια) that approached the charm of Nikostratos, but that he sometimes imitated the intensity of Dio of Prusa. While Nikostratos appears only here in the *Lives of the Sophists*, the *Souda* informs us that Nikostratos was a highly regarded *rhetor* during the reign of Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161) who left behind a varied literary output. In addition to encomia for the emperor and others, Nikostratos wrote the following works now known only by their title: *Dekamuthia*, *Eikones*, *Polumuthia*, *Thalattourgoi*, "and very many other things."²⁰ Aelian may have found both the style and content of Nikostratos' works attractive. It is significant that Philostratus could compare Aelian's style with the intensity of Dio of Prusa, for whom Philostratus had the utmost respect (*VS* 487–488), and we find Aelian's prose style at its most intense in the preface and epilogue of the *NA*.

But the style that characterizes the majority of the *NA* is the aforementioned simple style known as *apheleia* (ἀφέλεια), and Aelian was not alone in his literary tastes, for *apheleia* was the style preferred also by Lucian, Longus, and Philostratus. Hermogenes describes *apheleia* as the appropriate mode for expressing thoughts that are pure, "for [thoughts] common to all men and which pertain or seem to pertain to all and which possess nothing deep or cunningly contrived, it is clear that they would be simple to us and pure" (αἱ γὰρ ἀπάντων ἀνθρώπων κοιναὶ καὶ εἰς πάντας ἀνελθοῦσαι ἢ δόξασαι ἀνελθεῖν καὶ μηδὲν ἔχουσιν βαθύ μηδὲ περινενοημένον δῆλον ὡς ἀφελεῖς ἂν εἴησαν ἡμῖν καὶ καθαρά, *Id.* 2.3). Thoughts typically expressed in the simple style are frequent in the lyrics of Anacreon, in the pastoral poetry of Theocritus, and in the comedies of Menander, for *apheleia* was considered the appropriate medium for representing the kinds of characters that appeared in those genres, i.e. women and young men in love, cooks, gluttons, and farmers; for that same reason *apheleia* was generally thought to be inappropriate for political oratory. The simple style adopted

¹⁹ Johnson 1997 suggests that Philostratus' remarks imply that Aelian was following a pattern already established by Demosthenes and Cicero. On the difficulty of situating Aelian within the world of second- and third-century sophists, see Stamm 2003: 24–37 and Prandi 2005: 157–158.

²⁰ *Souda* v 404.

by Aelian therefore *appears* to be non-rhetorical, a means of conjuring a literary persona that, as Johnson puts it, “wants to convey information in a very clear and ingenuous fashion to a person who is listening in a sincere and unassuming way: a young person, perhaps, or an adult who can still remember his educational experience as a child.”²¹ It should be remembered that this stylistic simplicity is a deliberate effect. Aelian says clearly in the preface to the *NA* that he has dressed up his discourses in “the common language” (τὴν συνήθη λέξιν). The *NA* is, therefore, an extension of the “character writing” described by Hermogenes (ὁ ῥητορικός λόγος, *Id.* 2.3): the voice that speaks in the *NA* must not be mistaken for belonging to Aelian-the-author, but should rather be understood as the rhetorically engineered voice of a persona, an alter ego, a learned figure with a passion for wisdom and an eagerness for transmitting to curious readers what he has learned.

There follows in Philostratus’ brief biography an enlightening anecdote: Philostratus the Lemnian once encountered Aelian as he was holding a book that was still in his hands and reading it with intense anger, whereupon the Lemnian asked him what he was so excited about. Aelian replied, “I have finished my *Indictment of the Little Woman* – that’s my name for the tyrant who was recently killed, because he disgraced Roman affairs with his utter licentiousness” (ἐκπεπόνηται μοι, ἔφη, κατηγορία τοῦ Γύννιδος, καλῶ γὰρ οὕτω τὸν ἄρτι καθηρημένον τύραννον, ἐπειδὴ ἀσελγεία πάσῃ τὰ Ῥωμαίων ἥσχυνε, *VS* 625). The young emperor Elagabalus (r. 218–222), famously reviled for his effeminacy and licentiousness, fits well the description of the assassinated tyrant to whom Aelian refers. The anecdote concludes with the Lemnian’s witty rejoinder, “I would have admired you if you’d made your accusation while he was still alive,” and Philostratus’ own narrative commentary that, “indeed it’s the mark of a man to cut down a tyrant while he’s alive, while anyone can trample on one who’s dead” (εἶναι γὰρ δὴ τὸ μὲν ζῶντα τύραννον ἐπικόπτειν ἀνδρός, τὸ δὲ ἐπεμβαίνειν κειμένῳ παντός).

The story offers much for a consideration of Aelian’s political engagement and, by extension, his masculine persona, or in other words, how much he measures up to Roman ideals of the “real man.” In Philostratus’ conceptualization, the instability of Aelian’s performance of masculinity makes him vulnerable to criticism. Yet despite Philostratus’ attempt here to diminish the reputation of the writer whom he had praised in the preceding paragraph, we must think of Aelian as a personality responsive to

²¹ Johnson 1997: 12; see also Schmid 1893: 3.8–12 and Anderson 1993: 95.

the political landscape of the early third century and not merely as an escapist academic concerned only with the fantastic and with curiosities of natural history. Philostratus takes this opportunity to impugn Aelian's apparent hypocrisy in voicing indignation at the effeminacy of the dead emperor, but a more sympathetic interpretation would be to see in this episode Aelian's rhetorical self-positioning within Rome's new imperial order under Elagabalus' successor, Alexander Severus (r. 222–235). Whatever Aelian's political silence during the reign of Elagabalus, outspoken criticism of the failed predecessor was, as Pliny's *Panegyric* of Trajan demonstrates, an effective strategy for ingratiating oneself with the new regime. Furthermore, this episode represents Aelian's political posturing merely at its loudest.²² Given the tact, subtlety, and dissembling required to voice any political criticism during this period, it is more profitable, I argue, to gauge this apparently radical modulation of Aelian's political voice by approaching even an ostensibly non-political text like the *NA* as a sophisticated commentary on kingship and the various failures of Rome's emperors. A shrewd member of the cultural elite, Aelian knew how to negotiate the dangerous minefield of Imperial politics.²³

Philostratus also informs us that Aelian claimed never to have traveled anywhere outside of Italy, never to have been on board a ship, and to have no knowledge of the sea (Ἐφασκε δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ οὗτος μηδ' ἀποδεδημηκέναι ποι τῆς γῆς ὑπὲρ τὴν Ἰταλῶν χώραν, μηδὲ ἐμβῆναι ναῦν, μηδὲ γινῶναι θάλατταν, *VS* 625). This statement appears, however, to contradict Aelian's own claim, in the midst of a discourse on animal prodigies, that "I myself saw even a five-footed bull that was sacred, a dedication to this same god [Zeus] in the great city of the Alexandrians, in the grove called the god's, where densely grown persea trees produced a lovely shade and appearance" (ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ πεντάποδα βοῦν ἱερὸν ἐθεασάμην, ἀνάθημα τῷ θεῷ τῷδε ἐν τῇ πόλει τῇ Ἀλεξανδρέων τῇ μεγάλῃ, ἐν τῷ καλουμένῳ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄλσει, ἔνθα περσέαι σύμφυτοι σκιὰν περικαλλὴ καὶ ὄψιν ἀπεδείκνυντο, *NA* II.40, p. 279, lines 17–20). There have been attempts, beginning with Wellmann, to argue that this statement reflects not the autopsy of Aelian himself, but of Apion, Aelian's source for this passage.²⁴ Indeed, Aelian the narrator qualifies Apion's authority at the beginning of this passage ("if he's not telling tall tales," εἰ μὴ τερατεύεται, line 6), in which case we might interpret the claim to autopsy as having belonged originally to Apion, with Aelian simply retaining Apion's first-person plea for the veracity of his account. But

²² Cf. Prandi 2005: 71–80. ²³ Johnson 1997: 6–7.

²⁴ Wellmann 1894: 486, 1896: 250, and *RE* I.486; See also Croiset and Croiset 1899: 774, Scholfield 1958: xii, Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1971, and Wilson 1997: 5.

I cannot believe that Aelian was so careless; he was, as Schettino reminds us, a consummate rhetorical artist²⁵ and in the preface and epilogue of the *NA* he prides himself on his skill at transforming his literary sources. Alternatively, we might consider the possibility that Aelian did in fact see the five-footed bull with his own eyes in Alexandria – a possibility that would contradict Philostratus’ assertion that Aelian never traveled outside Italy. Schettino tries to have it both ways: Aelian *did* travel to Alexandria and saw the five-footed bull with his own eyes, and Philostratus’ statement must either be an ironic reversal (“un capovolgimento ironico”) or, if sincere, it must refer to a time after Aelian had given up his sophistic career and ceased traveling. I would like to believe Aelian, and I am even drawn in by the details that he offers of the sacred grove of Zeus and the cool shade that it provided – these certainly seem like the narrative embellishments of one who actually visited the site. But Philostratus’ statement leaves little room for the kind of qualifications imagined by Schettino, and I think that Aelian did in fact spend his entire life in Italy. I am therefore inclined to agree with Kindstrand that Aelian has fabricated this episode in accordance with literary convention: the claim to autopsy is emphatic, a gesture that pleads for his invention to be taken seriously.²⁶ Moreover, Aelian is careful in this passage to distinguish clearly between his literary sources (λέγει δὲ Ἀπίων . . . λέγει δὲ ὁ αὐτὸς . . . Νικοκρέων ὁ Κύπριος) and his own autopsy (ἐγὼ δὲ . . . ἐθεασάμην), a distinction that he sustains in the chapter’s final statement: “And I related what has come before my eyes and ears” (ἐγὼ δὲ ὅσα εἰς ἔμην ὄψιν τε καὶ ἀκοὴν ἀφίκετο εἶπον, II.40, p. 279, lines 23–24). The claim to autopsy then must not be the result of his carelessly copying Apion. On the contrary, he emphasizes the authority of his own narrative *ego*, but he does so by means of a thoroughly literary gesture, even conjuring the site of his putative autopsy as an inviting *locus amoenus*, seducing us into his fiction by means of a charming topography.

The problem is nevertheless instructive for readers making any kind of claim about the author of the *NA*. Amid the complex layering of sources within Aelian’s own text, and when the narrator so seldom reveals anything explicit about his identity, it becomes a tricky business to say anything about “Aelian” with any certainty. Consider also that Aelian’s repeated boasting never to have left Italy is, according to Philostratus, the reason why Aelian was admired even more in Rome, for he was committed, it seemed, to maintaining Roman identity (ὅθεν καὶ λόγου πλείονος κατὰ τὴν Ῥώμην ἡξιούτω ὡς τιμῶν τὰ ἡθη, *VS* 625). The question of Aelian’s

²⁵ Schettino 2005: 305.

²⁶ Kindstrand 1998: 2960.

Roman identity, already addressed here, will be developed more fully in [Chapter 4](#), but it suffices to say for the moment that for one whose Roman character was so apparently conservative, his choice to adopt a foreign tongue as his favored mode of literary expression remains a rather odd choice, not to mention his reticence within the *NA* to declare that he is actually a Roman and his refusal to cite a single Latin source. This apparent contradiction is not merely the result of comparing two different texts by different authors (Philostratus' assertion against Aelian's own writings); it is, rather, indicative of the kind of contradictions that regularly occur within the pages of the *NA* itself, where attempts to fix the author's univocal presence are routinely foiled. The reader is left to grapple with the many-voicedness of the *NA*, a polyphony that, as it turns out, one might have expected all along in a text that proudly declares its structural variety. So defiant of the notion of a single authorial identity or attitude, the text invites interpretations that explore the ever-shifting, labile nature of the narrative voice.²⁷

Philostratus begins the concluding section of Aelian's life with a bit of intellectual genealogy: we learn that he was at one point the student of Pausanias and that he admired Herodes Atticus as "the most varied of speakers" (ποικιλώτατον ῥητόρων, *VS* 625), an important detail about Aelian's aesthetic formation, as *poikilia* becomes the structuring principle of both the *NA* and the *VH*. The biography closes with the notice that Aelian lived more than sixty years and that he died without any children, "because," he says, "he excused himself from the procreation of children by never marrying, but this is not the time to philosophize over whether this is a blessing or a burden" (παιδοποιίαν γὰρ παρητήσατο τῷ μὴ γῆμαί ποτε. τοῦτο δὲ εἴτε εὐδαιμον εἴτε ἄθλιον οὐ τοῦ παρόντος καιροῦ φιλοσοφῆσαι). I address Aelian's thoughts on marriage in relation to Roman culture more fully in [Chapter 4](#), but for now I wish to understand this statement within the context of Philostratus' portrait of Aelian. Framed within a section on rhetorical training and practice, the remark about Aelian's decision not to marry and raise a family is ostensibly non-judgmental. But considering that Philostratus' generally eulogistic account of Aelian's life was earlier offset by the embarrassing, emasculating anecdote about Aelian's public performance of his oration *Indictment of the Little Woman*, this seemingly neutral information about Aelian's lifelong bachelor status becomes a parting jibe about his suspicious failures to live up to contemporary Roman ideals of masculinity. Philostratus himself, by contrast, could boast of a

²⁷ For a similar interpretation of Pliny's *Natural History*, see Murphy 2004: 9–11.

wife and family, even though he is silent about them in his writings.²⁸ The oscillation of Aelian's personae within the spectrum between masculine and feminine is a defining feature of my reading of the *NA*, a text expressive of the variability of the intellectual's sexual, social, and political self-positioning in Severan Rome.

Evidence from the *Souda*

There remains, finally, a brief, but informative notice about Aelian in the tenth-century Byzantine *Souda* lexicon. It is here that we learn that Aelian's full name was Claudius Aelianus, that he came from Praeneste (modern Palestrina) outside Rome, but that his professional life was based in Rome itself (ἀπὸ Πραϊνεστοῦ τῆς Ἰταλίας . . . ἐσοφίστευσεν ἐν Ῥώμῃ αὐτῇ, *Souda*, αἰ- 178). Despite Philostratus' claim that Aelian had no talent for declamation, Aelian was apparently called, according to the *Souda*, "honey-tongued" (μελίγλωσσος) and "honey-voiced" (μελίφθογγος), epithets that reveal something more than the mute eloquence of the written word.²⁹

We learn here also that Aelian was a high priest (ἀρχιερεὺς), though the Byzantine source remains silent about what divinity Aelian served and where precisely. According to Rüpke's prosopography and year-by-year lists of sacerdotal offices, only three individuals with the name Aelianus held priesthoods in Rome during the span of Aelian's lifetime (c. 165–230).³⁰ These were L. Roscius Aelianus Paculus, priest of the Salii Palatini from 167 to 170, and then *flamen* from 171 to 200; Q. Aradius Rufinus Optatus Aelianus, who served as a *sodalis augustalis* from 219; and L. Roscius Aelianus Paculus Salvius Rufus Iulianus, who served as *epulo* from 221 and then simultaneously as *fetialis* from 226. Even though the surviving epigraphical evidence is incomplete and cannot therefore provide conclusive evidence, the absence of a Claudius Aelianus from these priestly lists at least leaves open the possibility that Aelian was a priest not in Rome, but in his home town of Praeneste. In the early nineteenth century, Koraes and Jacobs supposed that Aelian served as high priest of the Praenestine goddess Fortuna,³¹ a supposition that was later taken up uncritically by Wellmann and Scholfield.³² Kindstrand accepts the possibility that Aelian did have some priestly role in his lifetime, but he emphasizes the lack of evidence

²⁸ Bowie 2009: 20. ²⁹ Stamm 2003: 28. ³⁰ See Rüpke 2008.

³¹ Koraes 1805: 145 and Jacobs 1839–1842: 390.

³² Wellmann 1894: 486, 1916: 1, and Scholfield 1958: xi. See also Meyboom 1995: 206 n. 22, 219 n. 67, and Maspero 1998: 6.

for identifying Aelian specifically as high priest of Fortuna at Praeneste.³³ Schettino, on the other hand, has enthusiastically reformulated the traditional interpretation, seeing the syncretism of Isis with Fortuna in the cult at Praeneste and Aelian's interest in Egyptian religion generally as evidence for identifying Aelian as a priest of Isis.³⁴

Schettino's hypothesis is certainly attractive, but given the five references to Isis in the *NA*, I think that if Aelian had been a priest of Isis, then he would have used at least one of these instances as an opportunity for voicing devotion to the goddess or at the very least for indicating his affiliation with the cult.³⁵ There are, moreover, no references to Isis at all in the *VH*, and the one reference in the fragments, describing Marcus Volusius' attempt to escape proscription by disguising himself as an attendant of Isis, proves nothing conclusively about Aelian's own role as priest.³⁶ In the absence of any strong evidence, then, the identification of Aelian as a priest of Isis must remain purely conjectural.

But perhaps Aelian's own silence about his priestly duties should be taken as an indication of how we as readers should approach the matter. The vaunting of positions and titles is, after all, a trait that Aelian says belongs to his critics and enemies, whereas the unwillingness to announce his own priestly office is consistent with the figure who has renounced a life of celebrity and whose authorial *ego* merges with the chorus of ancient voices from the library. What matters for Aelian is not that he fulfilled the priestly duties of this or that god or goddess in this or that city, but that divinity itself has exerted a powerful influence on his thought. The evidence from the *Souda* that Aelian was a high priest merely lends added significance to the many religious discussions that pervade the *NA*. The role of animals in cult sacrifice and the symbology of animals in the myths and beliefs of the ancient world were for Aelian more than antiquarian or cultural curiosities; they were the traditions of an important facet of his public life.³⁷

Conclusion

Despite the fragmented subjectivity of the *NA*, the collection is nevertheless bookended by a preface and epilogue that create the illusion of the univocal presence of the authorial voice. An analysis of the preface and epilogue,

³³ Kindstrand 1998: 2958–2959. ³⁴ Schettino 2005: 305–307.

³⁵ *NA* 10.22, 10.23, 10.27, 10.31, and 10.45.

³⁶ Fr. 121 Hercher, 124a–c Domingo-Forasté. Cf. V. Max. 3.8.

³⁷ *VH* 3.13 may offer a hint about Aelian's active public life; see Wilson 1997: 5–6.

supplemented by analyses of relevant passages from Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* and the tenth-century *Souda* lexicon, gives some sense of Aelian's elusive literary persona.

Introducing his choice of subject matter in the preface of the *NA*, Aelian figures himself within a well-established philosophical debate on the capacity of animals for reason (*logos*) and the long tradition of using animals to explore and critique human morality. The development of this philosophically inclined persona continues in the epilogue to the *NA*, where Aelian defines himself not as a philosopher strictly speaking, but as someone ignited with a passion for wisdom. Aelian also sets himself apart from his peers at Rome, declining the financial benefits and social advancement that would have come from being a successful public speaker. In contrast to such posturing, Aelian assimilates himself to the poets, the historians, and the natural scientists of antiquity. Aelian also questions the destruction of animals in the hunt, thereby setting himself at odds not just with the long literary tradition on the moral value of hunting but also with popular culture at Rome, where crowds were awed by the elaborate spectacle of the *venationes*.

Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* explicitly raises the issue of Aelian's ethnic background and cultural identity. Understanding the polyglot linguistic milieu of Rome in the late second and early third century is significant for gauging Aelian's success as a literary artist. But whereas the scholarly tradition has sought to posit a specific ethnic background or cultural identity for the writer from Praeneste (Roman, Greek, Egyptian, or even something other), his own literary output obfuscates the issue: in the formation of a Hellenic literary persona Aelian avoided culturally specific self-identifications. Aelian's Romanness is nevertheless crucial for understanding the *NA* within its cultural context. Only later in the *VH* does Aelian begin to self-identify explicitly as a Roman, a gradual coming-out in the literary realm that stands in stark contrast to Philostratus' remarks about how much Aelian was esteemed by contemporaries for maintaining a conservative Roman character. Philostratus' anecdote about Aelian's recitation of his oration against the emperor Elagabalus, as well as his remarks about the fact that Aelian never married and avoided having children reveal that Aelian's countercultural public persona was formed in part by his failure and/or unwillingness to conform to the normative notions of Roman masculinity.

Finally, the evidence from the tenth-century *Souda* lexicon introduces the subject of Aelian's public role as high priest (*arkhiereus*). While the scholarly tradition has been inclined to hypothesize that Aelian served as a priest of

Isis/Fortuna in his home town of Praeneste, there is ultimately no conclusive evidence to support this conjecture. The biographical notice about Aelian's public role as high priest does, however, enhance our understanding of the significance of religion and the divine in the development of Aelian's literary persona.

Animals and agroikoi in Aelian's Rustic Letters

Epistolography in the Second Sophistic

Twenty fictional letters have survived in two manuscripts with the heading “from the rustic letters of Aelian” (ἐκ τῶν Αἰλιανοῦ ἀγροικικῶν ἐπιστολῶν).¹ Though the attribution to Aelian was once thought to be spurious,² it is now generally agreed that the letters are authentic: apart from Hercher’s identification of strong linguistic parallels with the *NA* and the *VH*,³ there is the ancient evidence of Aristainetos (fifth/sixth century CE?), one of whose own fictional epistles claims to be by Aelian himself and uses material from Ael. *Ep.* 7–8.⁴ Philostratus’ remark that Aelian could speak the Athenian dialect as well as anyone from the Attic heartland (*VS* 624) surely alludes in part to Aelian’s success in recreating the voices of Athenian farmers in the *Rustic Letters*. It is not known for certain when Aelian wrote the letters, but Hercher suggested that Aelian composed them in his youth, on the basis that they contain a vocabulary and style not yet fully developed.⁵ Reich even assigned a *terminus ante quem* of 200 CE,⁶ which means Aelian would have written the letters probably in his twenties, during the first decade in the reign of Septimius Severus. An early date is also attractive given the possibility that the letters grew out of the *progumnasmata*, or rhetorical school exercises, especially *êthopoia* and *prosôpopoia*, wherein Aelian would have been asked by his teacher to compose in the voice and style of a variety of characters from history or literature.⁷ But we need not accept an early date on these bases. What

¹ These are cod. Ambrosianus gr. 81, B 4 Sup. (10th cent.), ff. 121r–128v, and cod. Mattritensis gr. 4693 (63 Iriarte, 15th cent.); see De Stefani 1901.

² Namely by Koraes, Jacobs, and Croiset; see Benner and Fobes 1949: 344–345 and Kindstrand 1998: 2977, both with bibliography.

³ Hercher 1854: 756–758. ⁴ Aristainet. 2.1; see Drago 2007. ⁵ Hercher 1854.

⁶ Reich 1894: 67. See also Kontoyannis 1914: 5.

⁷ Kindstrand 1998: 2977 and Rosenmeyer 2001: 259–260. On the exercises, see Kennedy 2003: 47, 84, 115, 164, and 213.

Hercher described as a not yet fully developed style may in fact be a deliberate effect of Aelian's choice to write a more casual prose appropriate to his characters.⁸ Furthermore, the letters' relationship with the *progumnasmata* does not necessarily mean that Aelian wrote the letters in youth; he may well have written them later in life while reflecting upon his experience as a student in crafting alternative literary personae. While I am particularly interested in connections between the intertwining of human and animal life in the letters and in Aelian's other works, my reading of the letters ultimately does not rely on their early date: Aelian's interest in animality persists regardless of whether he wrote the letters before, after, or indeed even during his composition of the *NA*.

Recreating the milieu of the rustic Greek past was a favorite literary pursuit of the Second Sophistic, the most famous example being Longus' pastoral romance, *Daphnis and Chloe*. Nor was Aelian alone in giving this theme an epistolary setting: Alciphron's much larger collection of four books balanced letters from urban parasites and courtesans with letters from fisherman and farmers.⁹ It has been suggested that the letters of Alciphron served as the primary inspiration for Aelian, who may have been Alciphron's younger contemporary, though there is no consensus on this.¹⁰ Drawing on the world and the characters of New Comedy, the letters of Alciphron and Aelian have much in common. Though Aelian chose to restrict his fictional world to that of Athenian farms, some of his rustics demonstrate a fascination with courtesans and urban luxuries, thus offering the reader indirect glimpses of life in the big city. Whereas, for example, Alciphron dedicates an entire book of letters to courtesans, Aelian offers a single correspondence from the courtesan Opora (*Ep.* 8). There are no letters from comic parasites in Aelian's collection, though in one letter a farmer named Anthemion boasts of how much work he accomplishes in a day, provocatively asking his addressee, Drakes, "What work have you done that is any good, and what labor that is useful?" (Τί σοι καλὸν εἶργασται καὶ τί σοι πεπόνηται χρηστόν; *Ep.* 4). This may imply that Drakes is, by contrast, an urban parasite with no such work ethic; compared with

⁸ Hodkinson 2008: 71–74, 153, and 166–170.

⁹ On Alciphron, see Rosenmeyer 2001: 255–307 and Hodkinson 2008: 98–152.

¹⁰ Reich 1894: 44 and Benner and Fobes 1949: 345. The various arguments for priority and imitation among Aelian, Alciphron, Longus, and Lucian are summarized by Hunter 1983: 6–15. Kindstrand 1998: 2978–2979 is not persuaded by Reich's argument claiming the priority of Alciphron. Rosenmeyer 2001: 308 accepts that Aelian imitated Alciphron. Hodkinson remains cautiously agnostic: "The many and various arguments concerning similarities and imitations between all of these authors [Aelian, Alciphron, Longus, and Lucian] have always been, and will always be when standing alone, inconclusive, since they rely upon subjective value judgments to determine priority where imitation is accepted" (2008: 80–81).

Anthemion's modest pea soup and honest drink, we are to imagine Drakes as spoiled by the culinary decadence of the city. Finally, though Aelian offers no letters from fishermen, *Ep.* 18 details how Lakhes, the mutual friend of Demulos and Blepsias, has left his farm behind and taken up the life of a fisherman. Demulos is critical of Lakhes' choice, but his criticism also reveals his own fantasies about adventure on the high seas.¹¹ Aelian's inclusion of a single letter from a courtesan and indirect references to a parasite and a fisherman, collectively nested within his own miniature book of letters from farmers, seem to be a studied allusion to Alciphron's books of letters by these same character types. This is hardly decisive proof of Alciphron's priority, though, since Alciphron could have seen in Aelian's letters latent opportunities for epistolary expansion in his own four-book collection.

Philostratus, Aelian's contemporary, also wrote letters, the vast majority of which, composed in his own voice, are erotic in theme.¹² There are 31 love letters addressed to women and 24 addressed to boys.¹³ Philostratus' erotic letters may have aligned with the bisexual attractions of his personal life, but it is naïve to make assumptions about an author's sexual life solely on the basis of his literary compositions. Alternatively, Philostratus' letters to boys may be purely artificial, a gesture of affiliation with Greek culture through the medium of the pederastic tradition. Philostratus' love letters also engage in a contemporary erotic discourse about the respective pleasures of sex with women and boys. The theme had already been elaborated in numerous genres during the Second Sophistic, including romance (especially Xenophon of Ephesus, Achilles Tatius, and Longus), philosophical dialogue (Plutarch's *Amores*), satire (Lucian's *Erotes*), and epigram (Strato's so-called *Musa puerilis*). Philostratus contributes to the ongoing debate by giving the theme an epistolary setting.

I will say more below about *erôs* in Aelian's letters, though for the moment it is noteworthy that none of his Athenian farmers displays an erotic interest in boys. Aelian elsewhere freely and sympathetically writes about *paiderastia* (see [Chapter 8](#)), and so its absence from the *Letters* is curious. It is entirely plausible, though, that he thought an *erôs* for boys to be inappropriate epistolary material for rustics – even Athenian rustics.

¹¹ Rosenmeyer 2001: 320–321.

¹² On Philostratus' letters, see Benner and Fobes 1949: 387–411, Rosenmeyer 2001: 322–338, Hodgkinson 2008: 179–244, and Goldhill 2009b: 287–308.

¹³ The remaining 18 are not love letters, but epistles addressed to other named individuals, including Epictetus (*Ep.* 42, 65, and 69), Chariton (66), the emperor Caracalla (72), and his mother Julia Domna (73).

Aelian's letters are, after all, firmly rooted in the traditions of Attic New Comedy and the plays of Menander, in which *paiderastia* was conspicuously absent.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the contemporary literature that idealized rustic life, *paiderastia* is represented as a decadent urban pleasure. This mentality is typified in Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* with the character of the parasite Gnathon, depicted as an intruder from the city and corrupting the pastoral world of the novel with his appetitive *erôs* for Daphnis.¹⁵ In the same way that Aelian does not offer the reader any letters from urban parasites, neither does he offer love letters to country boys from their sophisticated urban *erastai*.

There may have been other letters. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the manuscripts announce that the existing texts are "from the rustic letters of Aelian" (ἐκ τῶν Αἰλιανοῦ ἀγροικικῶν ἐπιστολῶν), implying a larger collection now lost. Even if there were other letters, I am inclined to agree with Bowie's interpretation of the collection as an artistic whole:¹⁶ the editorial selections and juxtapositions create a compositional unity that determines reading and interpretation. The collection is not a random sampling of letters; on the contrary, structure is apparent. The highlight is the correspondence between the good neighbor Kallipides and the misanthrope Knemon (*Ep.* 13–16), a grouping of four letters that is balanced by an exchange of letters between Derkullos and the courtesan Opora (7–8) and between Lamprias and Truphe (11–12). Additionally, letters that do not appear to be a part of a sequential correspondence are tied to the collection as a whole by references to writers, addressees, or characters that appear in the other letters. Thus *Ep.* 1 recounts Euthukomides' erotic encounter with a woman named Mania, who receives mention again in *Ep.* 2 by a different writer named Komarkhides. Aelian also constructs triangular relationships between writers and addressees: Character A writes to Character B and then switches roles to become the recipient of a letter from Character C. Thus *Ep.* 4 is written to Drakes by Anthemion, who becomes the recipient of *Ep.* 5, written by a third character named Baiton; similarly, in *Ep.* 9 Khremes writes to Parmenon and then becomes the recipient of *Ep.* 19, written by someone named Mormias. From this brief description of the sophisticated network of connections between the letters, one can see how the reader generates meaning not just from the content of the individual letters, but also by their arrangement, which was itself the result of numerous macro-compositional choices.

¹⁴ See Plu. *Moralia* 712c and Lape 2004: 21. ¹⁵ Hunter 1983: 69–73.

¹⁶ See Bowie in Easterling and Knox 1989: 121; see also Rosenmeyer 2001: 309.

By writing short fictional epistles from farmers, combining theme and scale to charming effect, Aelian honed his literary craft to meet the standards of contemporary taste. Reardon's characterization of Alciphron's technical virtuosity as "du pointillisme littéraire" could just as well apply to Aelian, and Anderson's description of the prevailing fashion for the "art of the miniature" in the literature of the Second Sophistic is apt here.¹⁷ More recently, Rosenmeyer has explained how epistolography was the perfect medium for the literary miniature while at the same time offering an opportunity for demonstrating editorial arrangement as itself an act of composition: "Letters are by nature fragmentary glimpses into the lives of their writers, and are easily combined into collected correspondences."¹⁸ Aelian's interest in crafting a collection of epistolary fragments is therefore consistent with the creation and manipulation of literary fragments in all of his miscellanies. Aelian's compilatory aesthetic and his fascination with literary *poikilia* are the subject of the following chapter.

Rustic subjectivity

One of the earliest literary representations of rustic Athenians comes from Aristophanes' *Clouds*, in which Strepsiades laments to his son that he ever had to marry a woman from the city:

εἴθ' ὦφελ' ἡ προμνήστρι' ἀπολέσθαι κακῶς
 ἥ τις με γῆμ' ἐπῆρε τὴν σὴν μητέρα.
 ἐμοὶ γὰρ ἦν ἄγροικος ἡδιστος βίος,
 εὐρωτιῶν, ἀκόρητος, εἰκῇ κείμενος,
 βρύων μελίτταις καὶ προβάτοις καὶ στεμφύλοις.
 ἔπειτ' ἔγημα Μεγακλέους τοῦ Μεγακλέους
 ἀδελφιδῆν ἄγροικος ὦν ἐξ ἄστεως,
 σεμνὴν, τρυφῶσαν, ἐγκεκοισυρωμένην.
 ταύτην ὅτ' ἐγάμουν, συγκατεκλινόμην ἐγὼ
 ὄζων τρυγός, τρασιᾶς, ἐρίων, περιουσίας,
 ἡ δ' αὖ μύρου, κρόκου, καταγλωττισμάτων,
 δαπάνης, λαφυγμοῦ, Κωλιάδος, Γενετυλλίδος.

(Ar. *Nu.* 41–52)

I wish she'd drop dead, that matchmaker who forced me to marry your mother. I had the sweetest rustic life – it was free of washing up, free of limits, free of order, teeming with bees and flocks and olive cakes. Then I married the daughter of Megakles, son of Megakles, even though I was a

¹⁷ Reardon 1971: 182 and Anderson 1993: 190–196.

¹⁸ Rosenmeyer 2001: 259; see also Hodkinson 2008: 155–156.

rustic and she came from the city. She was haughty, extravagant, as luxurious as a lady from Persia. On our wedding night, I got into bed reeking of too much raw wine, dried figs, and wool, but she smelled of myrrh, saffron, French kisses, money, gluttony, like Aphrodite on the coast, like a wanton birthday party.

Even in this early image of the Athenian farmer, Aristophanes typifies rustic life by its proximity to organic matter, agrarian and pastoral foodstuffs, and animals themselves, especially bees and sheep. The rustic is depicted as a malodorous extension of the land, its creatures, and their byproducts. Strepsiades' urban wife, by contrast, applies a variety of scents and perfumes to make herself olfactorily pleasing. While Aristophanes' sophisticated urban audience may have appreciated a woman who made sure that she smelled pretty when she got into bed, the rustic Strepsiades equates the perfumed body of his wife with decadence and illicit sexuality.

Aelian's letters extend the comic tradition of representing the rustic's life as intermingled with the life of animals, but the letters also complicate Aristophanes' vision of a straightforward division between the rustic and urban perspectives. Aelian is of course interested in the humorous tensions that arise when rustic and urban lives collide, especially in the realm of the erotic: Derkullos' rustic naïveté is contrasted with the urban sophistication of the courtesan Opora (*Ep.* 7–8), the bumpkin Khremes has very little sense of how to deal either with courtesans or with soldiers (*Ep.* 9), and Mormias complains that his son's marriage to a flute girl is distracting his son from his rustic chores (*Ep.* 19). But whereas Aristophanes' comic image of Strepsiades relies upon an essential opposition between Strepsiades' rusticity and the audience's urbanity, Aelian's epistolary *êthopoïia* delves more deeply into the rustic perspective to explore how rustic subjectivity is formed not only by opposition to urbanity, but also by differentiating civilized and savage variations on rusticity. Aelian's farmers stylize their rusticity by marking the contours of their relationship with animal life. All rustics live in close proximity with animals, and so the boundary between human and animal is more fluid than in the urban sphere. This fluidity, then, offers a spectrum of possibilities for rustic subjectivity. One extreme is the putatively civilized farmer who asserts his moral authority and membership within conventional rustic society by marking his distance from and superiority over animal life. Another extreme is the putatively savage rustic who is represented by others and who represents himself as an animal. I explore these variations in greater detail in the next two sections of this chapter.

My emphasis on the blurring of the line between animal and human in the letters may at first seem to contradict the emphasis on human morality

and literary sophistication announced in *Ep.* 20, the final letter of the collection. Phaidrias writes to Sthenon that the countryside gives rise to everything that is beautiful, some of which lasts through the whole year and some of which lasts only for a season; the gods are their creators, but the earth is both mother and nurturer. The sentiment reflects Stoic and Cynic beliefs about living in harmony with nature and rejecting the worldly attachments of urban life (see [Chapter 5](#)). Among that which grows in the countryside are also justice (δικαιοσύνη) and moderation or self-control (σωφροσύνη), moral ideals that Phaidrias calls “the most beautiful of trees and the most profitable of fruits.” Everything that one needs, not just for physical sustenance but also for the cultivation of human morality, grows in the country.

In the second half of the letter, Phaidrias tells Sthenon not to disdain farmers (does Sthenon live in the city?), for “even here” (καὶ ἐνταῦθα) there is some σοφία. It is unclear at first whether by σοφία Phaidrias means natural “wisdom” or artificial “cleverness/sophistication.” The following sentence, though, makes it clear that he means “wisdom,” since the σοφία of farmers “has not been given a varied stylization by the tongue, nor has it been given a beautiful appearance by the power of words; rather, it is utterly silent and confesses its virtue through the very way we live” (γλώττη μὲν οὐ πεποικιλμένη οὐδὲ καλλωπιζομένη λόγων δυνάμει, σιγῶσα δὲ εὖ μάλα καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ τοῦ βίου τὴν ἀρετὴν ὁμολογοῦσα). The σοφία of Aelian’s farmers may indeed be silent, insofar as their letters lack a tongue and do not speak audibly, but the letters themselves, *qua* stylized literary fragments, are clear evidence that their writers are not *mere* rustics, much less irrational beasts. And if their letters are “rather sophisticated” (σοφώτερα) for the country, Phaidrias says that Sthenon should not be surprised, “since we are not Libyan or Lydian, but Athenian farmers” (οὐ γὰρ ἐσμεν οὔτε Λίβυες οὔτε Λυδοὶ ἀλλ’ Ἀθηναῖοι γεωργοί). The Attic countryside, by virtue of its being the mother of the Attic tongue, the very medium of *paideia*, must also by implication be the mother of human morality and human wisdom, which come naturally to Athenian farmers. Libyan and Lydian farmers may be *mere* rustics, but Athenian farmers are more sophisticated, and therefore more human.

In this programmatic final letter, therefore, Aelian establishes through one rustic voice the communal pride of the Athenian farmers in their own feelings of moral and intellectual superiority. But this is a conceit typical of literature from the Second Sophistic,¹⁹ and Aelian knows it, for throughout the letters Aelian reveals a reality that is quite different, as his Athenian

¹⁹ Hodkinson 2008: 142–150.

farmers live lives that are both literally and figuratively close to those of animals. On the one hand, it is not surprising that animals populate the world of the Attic farmers. One expects to find animals on farms, and so we read of real animals in the letters: sheep, calves, dogs, bees, goats, and hares. But animals also loom prominently in the imaginations of Aelian's farmers, either metaphorically, within similes, by metonymy, or via proverb,²⁰ and so Aelian's farmers talk or think in terms of lions, wolves, ticks, a gull, wild pigeons, doves, and crows. Animals are both part of the mundane reality of the Attic countryside and essential to the figurative discourse of its inhabitants. Aelian's farmers live with animals on a daily basis and they also conjure symbolic animals in their daily speech, or at least in their epistolary writing.

Animals and *agroikoi*

The lives of Aelian's farmers are so closely intertwined with those of animals that it is sometimes difficult to discern a firm division between human and non-human creatures. The second letter of the collection, for example, which is also the first letter in which animals appear, immediately causes interpretative difficulties. Komarkhides writes to Dropides:

Ἡμέρων ὁ μαλακὸς φελλεῖ ἐπέκοψε τὸ σκέλος πάνυ χρηστῶς, καὶ θέρμη ἐπέλαβεν αὐτοῦ, καὶ βουβῶν ἐπήρθη. βουλοίμην δ' ἂν αὐτὸν ἀναρρωσθῆναι ἢ μοι μεδίμνους ἰσχάδων ὑπάρξαι τέτταρας. τὴν οἶν τὴν τὰ μαλακὰ ἔρια, ἣν ἐπαινῶ πρὸς σέ, παρ' ἐμοῦ πρόσσειπε καὶ τῷ βοϊδίῳ καὶ τὴν κύνα, καὶ τὴν Μανίαν καὶ αὐτὴν χάριεν κέλευε. (*Ep.* 2)

Hemeron, the delicate one, did a really good job breaking his leg on a stony patch of ground, and fever overcame him, and his groin swelled. But I'd give up four *medimnoi* of dried figs if he'd recover. The ewe with the soft wool, the one about which I compliment you – give my best to her and the two calves and the bitch, and Mania herself, too – give her my best.

Aelian borrows the scenario and the language of the accident from Menander's *Georgos* (46–52), in which the old man Kleainetos is reported to have broken his leg and become ill. I have translated the first word of the letter, Ἡμέρων, as the personal name “Hemeron,” following the lead of Benner and Fobes in the Loeb edition.²¹ But “Hemeron” is an odd name: it has no precedent in Greek literature and there are no attestations of “Hemeron” in

²⁰ For proverbs in the letters, see Tsirimbas 1936.

²¹ The reading ὁμέρων in the codex Matritensis is rejected by all the editors.

the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*.²² A reader unfamiliar with the name might possibly even take it as a genitive of the adjective ἡμερος, meaning “tame,” “civilized,” or “gentle” and commonly applied to animals.²³ When the genitive plural form of this adjective appears in Greek, it very frequently does so in the phrase ἡμέρων ζώων, “of tame animals.”²⁴ It would therefore not be unreasonable for a reader to take the first word of *Ep.* 2 as a partitive genitive with ὁ μαλακός; the whole phrase would then mean “the delicate/soft one of my tame animals.” Given these alternatives, the reader wonders: who or what broke his or its leg? Was it a delicate man named Hemeron or was it a delicate animal that Komarkhides had tamed? The Menandrian precedent suggests the former; but the interpretation of ὁ μαλακός as one of Komarkhides’ pets is corroborated by his later use of the same word when referring to a favorite “ewe with soft (μαλακά) wool.”

Both possibilities are valid, and I do not insist on either as being better than the other. On the contrary, this ambiguity runs through the letter as a whole, which illustrates that human and animal lives are so mutually involved with one another, that it is difficult to say which has priority. The letter purports to be a communication from one man to another, but the content of the letter reveals four additional communications between Komarkhides and (a) the aforementioned ewe with soft wool, (b) two calves, and (c) a bitch, which humorously prompts Komarkhides to send greetings finally and almost as an afterthought to (d) Mania, probably the wife of Dropides. Rosenmeyer has suggested that the salutary closing of the letter serves as “either a parody of the traditional formula, or a pointed suggestion that animals on the farm are more valuable than a working woman.”²⁵ But Aelian also arranges here a sophisticated double juxtaposition, one epistolary, the other lexical: this letter follows the one that divulges Mania’s sexual relationship with Euthukomides, and so the juxtaposition of “bitch” and “Mania” in *Ep.* 2 cannot be accidental. One thinks especially of Helen’s famous self-accusations as a “bitch” in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as Semonides’ third type of woman in his

²² In the Aegean, the variants Ἡμέρα and Ἡμέρη are attested on Thasos and Chios, respectively, and eleven Ἡμεροί are attested on Rhodes from the third century BCE to the first century CE. In the Peloponnese, one Ἡμερώ is attested from Hermione. Three additional women named Ἡμέρα are attested in Pantikapaion in the Cimmerian Bosphoros, in Chersonesos in Tauris, and in Smyrna. No variants of the name are attested at all in Attica.

²³ Cf. LSJ s.v.

²⁴ Of the 402 instances of the word ἡμέρων found in the *TLG*, 89 times it is either paired with or implied with the noun ζώων.

²⁵ Rosenmeyer 2001: 312.

famous diatribe.²⁶ Mania may be a woman, but she is also metaphorically an animal.

The reverse is true in *Ep.* 5, as animals become metaphorically human when Baiton laments his empty hive and the departure of his bees. Writing to someone named Anthemion, Baiton at first characterizes his symbiotic relationship with the bees as one of *xenia*: “we,” he says, “used to feast (εἰσιτιῶμεν) them with the most perfect banquets, and they, as a result of their non-stop industriousness, used to feast us in return (ἀνθεισιτίων) with an abundance of beautiful honey.” In the second half of the letter, though, he thinks of the bees in more intimate terms:

ἐγὼ δὲ αὐτῶν ὅταν ὑπομνησθῶ τῆς πτήσεως καὶ τῆς εὐχαρίτου χορείας, οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἢ νομίζω θυγατέρας ἀφῆρησθαι. ὀργίζομαι μὲν οὖν αὐταῖς· τί γὰρ ἀπέλιπον τροφέα αὐτῶν καὶ ἀτεχνῶς πατέρα καὶ φρουρόν καὶ μελεδωνόν οὐκ ἀχάριτον; δεῖ δέ με ἀνιχνεῦσαι τὴν πλάνην αὐτῶν καὶ ὅποι ποτὲ ἀποδρᾶσαι κάθηνται, καὶ τίς αὐτάς ὑπεδέξατο καὶ τοῦτο· ἔχει γὰρ τοι τὰς μηδὲν προσηκούσας. εἴτα εὐρὼν ὄνειδιῶ πολλὰ τὰς ἀγνώμονας καὶ ἀπίστους. (*Ep.* 5)

And when I recollect their delightful, winged choreography, I think of nothing else but that I have been robbed of my daughters. Then I’m angry at them, for why did they abandon the one who nourished them, simply put, their father, protector, and not ungrateful guardian? But I must track down their wandering and where they have run off and settled and who took them in – this too, for he possesses, you understand, those who do not belong to him. Then, when I have found them, I will upbraid them severely as being unfeeling and unfaithful.

The letter is a charming monologue of loss. But expressing this apian relationship with such familial intimacy is motivated. At one point Baiton swears by Aristaïos and Apollo himself that he did not harm the bees. The reference to Aristaïos assimilates his own predicament with that of the mythological patron of beekeepers: Aristaïos’ own hive was empty, according to Vergil, “because his bees, as the story goes, had died from disease and hunger” (*amissis, ut fama, apibus morboque fameque*, *G.* 4.318). Baiton’s mythological allusion heightens the emotional intensity of his loss, for it is clear that his own bees have not died from disease or hunger. He feels that he has been “robbed of his daughters,” but the passive verb ἀφῆρησθαι begs the question: who is the thief? Baiton’s grief turns to anger, as he says he will track down the culprit, “this too, for he possesses, you understand, those who do not belong to him.” The remark is pointed, and

²⁶ *Il.* 3.180, 6.356 and *Od.* 4.145; Semon. 7.12–21. On Helen, see Blondell 2010.

the emphatic particle τοι, properly an ethical dative of the personal pronoun σὺ, directs the reader's attention back to the letter's addressee, Anthemion, the flowery imagery of whose name suggests that he himself is responsible for luring Baiton's bees away from their hive. At the beginning of the letter Baiton even states that their familiar meadow was "full of flowers" (ἀνθῶν εὐφορον), implying that it would take a man similarly abounding in flowers to seduce his bees. Baiton wants his bees back, and Anthemion should be encouraged to return them, as Baiton claims he is more upset at the bees, whom he calls "unfeeling and unfaithful." Anthemion may harbor the runaway bees, but the greater transgression belongs to the bees themselves, who have broken the bonds of affection and trust with their "father."

Two additional letters depict the intertwining of human and animal lives in the realm of the erotic. In *Ep.* 9, Khremes writes to Parmenon to say that he now understands why he had advised him to stay away from courtesans. What follows is a condemnation of the gluttony and two-facedness of *hetairai* that Aelian has adapted from a speech of the slave Parmenon in Menander's *Eunuch*.²⁷ Khremes then begins to describe his encounter with a courtesan named Thebaïs. When she came dancing provocatively in his direction, Khremes lifted her up by her waist (μέσῃν, a gesture of sexual aggression and violence),²⁸ threw her down on the couch, and was about to lay claim to the object of his lust; just then a soldier interrupted and took Thebaïs for himself. The letter ends with Khremes' enraged cursing: "And I wish he'd just die, that soldier who got in my way – Thrasuleon, I think, was his name, or some other such thing tangled up with a wild beast" (ἀπόλοιτο δὲ ὁ στρατιώτης ὁ διακωλύσας με· Θρασυλέων, οἶμαι, ἣν ὄνομα αὐτῷ ἢ ἄλλο τι τοιοῦτον συμπεπλεγμένον θηρίῳ). Presumably, as a courtesan, Thebaïs would have been paid by Khremes for her services, in which case Thrasuleon robbed Khremes of enjoying what his hard earned money had paid for. The name "Thrasuleon" means "bold lion," hence Khremes' remark that the soldier's name is "tangled up with a wild beast." Khremes' point is that the soldier's beastly name reflects his beastly nature: how uncivilized for the soldier to take what didn't belong to him. The irony, though, is that Khremes seems to be completely unaware of his own animal nature, as he was intending to make quick work of satisfying his sexual appetite so that he could return to his goats (σπεύδω καταλαβεῖν ἐν δύο τὰ σκέλη ἄρας καὶ ὑποστρέφειν ἐπὶ τὰς αἰγας πάλιν). Even Khremes' own name possesses an animal quality, evoking the verb χρεμετίζειν, which

²⁷ Cf. Ter. *Eu.* 929–940.

²⁸ Henderson 1991: 156.

means “to neigh” or “to whinny” like a horse. Very little, it turns out, distinguishes Khremes from Thrasuleon, except that the latter is bolder and therefore more effective at getting what he wants.

The rape of women by young men is a commonplace in the world of New Comedy, which explains the casual attitude towards rape demonstrated by the characters in Aelian’s letters. It is noteworthy, though, that in the very next letter Aelian shows us an alternative point of view that is critical of the licentious behavior of young men. Philierippos writes to Simulos:

Πέπυσμαί σου τὸν υἱὸν εἶναι λάγνην. τί οὖν αὐτὸν οὐ βία συλλαβὼν τομίαν εἰργάσω, ὥσπερ εἰώθαμεν τοὺς τράγους ἡμεῖς; τοῦτο γάρ τοι καὶ τὰ ζῶα ἀναπείθει ἡσυχίαν τε ἔχειν καὶ σωφρονεῖν εὖ μάλα. εἰμὶ δὲ ἐγὼ περὶ ταῦτα δήπου δεινός· ἀποφανῶ γάρ παραχρῆμα ὀλόκληρον, σάξας ἁλῶν καὶ ἐπαλείψας πίτταν· εἴτα ὑγιεινότερος ἔσται κρότωνος δήπου καὶ κολοκύντης, καὶ ἐρῶν παύσεται καὶ ἐπιτρίβων σοι τὴν οὐσίαν. ἐνόρχην δὲ ἀκόλαστον ὑγιαίνων τρέφοι τίς ἄν; (*Ep.* 10)

I’ve heard that your son is lecherous. Why don’t you take him by force and make him a eunuch, then, just like we do to our goats? For this, you know, persuades even animals both to be peaceful and to demonstrate the best self-control. And I myself am pretty clever when it comes to these things, for I’ll make him well again right away, applying a compress of salt and smearing on pitch. Then he’ll be healthier than a tick, I suppose, and a gourd, and he’ll stop being overcome by lust and wearing out your property. And who in his right mind would continue to raise a creature lacking in self-control with its testicles intact?

The opening of the letter is not without textual difficulty. In the first sentence I have printed υἱόν (“son”), following the three modern editions by Benner and Fobes, Leone, and Domingo-Forasté. The tenth-century codex Ambrosianus reads $\overline{\text{υν}}$ and the fifteenth-century codex Matritensis reads υν ; Musurus’ edition of 1499 printed υν and Hercher printed υν (“boar”).²⁹ In previous readings, then, this letter was nothing more than one farmer’s proposal to neuter a neighbor’s troublesome boar. In 1896, however, Radermacher proposed that the text must be corrected to υἱόν (“son”) on the grounds that the following statement – that castration persuades “even animals” (καὶ τὰ ζῶα) to behave – only makes sense if Philierippos’ intended victim is *not* an animal.³⁰ Suddenly, *Ep.* 10 becomes a comic (if not horrifying) vignette about a rustic remedy for a teenager’s

²⁹ For this portion of the text, I have followed the *apparatus criticus* of the Loeb edition by Benner and Fobes. Leone notes in his *apparatus* that the reading of the codex Ambrosianus is υἱόν (cf. υν Benner and Fobes). The Teubner edition of Domingo-Forasté is inconsistent and sometimes unreliable. See Nesselrath 1995. I have not consulted the manuscripts myself.

³⁰ Radermacher 1896: 464.

lust. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of this letter with *Ep.* 9, both about the licentious behavior of young men, contributes to the thematic pairing of letters throughout the collection.³¹

Philerippos' censure of the boy's behavior does not, however, imply that he believes that rape is wrong because of the sexual violence inflicted upon its victims. Philerippos is not apparently concerned with the objects of the boy's sexual assault; rather, the victim receiving Philerippos' sympathy is the boy's father, Simulos, whose property (οὐσίαν) the boy's licentious behavior is destroying. It is not even clear who or what inflamed the boy's lust; was it Simulos' slaves or farm animals, all of which would have counted as Simulos' property? The important thing for Philerippos is the boy's inability to control his sexual urges, an incontinence that makes him savage and assimilates him to the non-human animals of the farm, implying that one factor distinguishing humans from other animals is our supposed self-control over sexual behavior.

Kallipides and Knemon: civilized and savage rusticity

Philerippos' criticism of sexual *akolasia* ("lack of self-control") in *Ep.* 10 connects this letter with *Ep.* 20, in which Phaidrias boasts that the human virtue of *sôphrosunê* ("moderation/self-control") grows as natural produce amid the trees and fruit of the Attic countryside. Simulos' animal-son might seem to be an aberration from the natural *sôphrosunê* of the Athenian farmers, but the correspondence between Kallipides and Knemon (*Ep.* 13–16) offers a different variation on country living, depicting a community of rustics who actually embrace their baser animal instincts. The correspondence, inspired by comic and satiric sources,³² begins with Kallipides' attempt to change Knemon's misanthropic disposition: in the lives of farmers, one should expect mildness of character (τὸ ἡμερον τοῦ τρόπου, *Ep.* 13), but Knemon somehow is a "savage" (ἄγριος). Whenever he catches anyone on his property, he runs him off "like one chasing a wolf" (ὡς διώκων λύκον). Kallipides' remark offers an interesting reversal: though describing what he characterizes as Knemon's savage behavior, he imagines the situation briefly from Knemon's own perspective, in which it is not Knemon who

³¹ Additional thematic pairs/groupings may be identified as follows: *Ep.* 1 and 2 (references to Mania); 5 and 6 (misbehaving neighbors); 7 and 8 (the correspondence between Derkullos and Opora); 11 and 12 (the correspondence between Lamprias and Truphe); 13–16 (the correspondence between Kallipides and Knemon); and 17 and 18 (on finding/pursuing fortunes). Other combinations are of course possible.

³² Antiphanes' *Timon*, Menander's *Duskolos*, Lucian's *Timon*, and also Alciiphron 2.32 and 1.17–19. See Rosenmeyer 2001: 315.

is the savage beast, but the trespasser. Knemon's response in *Ep.* 14 is full of comic vitriol: despite his misanthropic disposition, he does not mind responding via letter, since he does not need to see Kallipides face-to-face; he envies the hero Perseus for his ability to fly above human society and also for being able to transform people into stone statues, ideal neighbors. The letter concludes with Knemon's despondent question, "What after all has got it into my head that I am a human?" (τί γὰρ καὶ μαθὼν εἰμὶ ἄνθρωπος;), an acknowledgment that there is something essentially inhuman in his unsociable character.

In *Ep.* 15, Kallipides makes a further attempt at befriending his misanthropic neighbor by inviting him to a *θυσία*, a communal sacrifice and festival, in honor of the rustic god Pan, which will surely inspire camaraderie: "when you have drunk with us and shared in the libations, you will be somewhat even more mild." Kallipides then imagines Knemon under the joint influence of Pan and Dionysus:

εἰ δέ που καὶ μεθύων κόρη περιπέσοις ἄβραν ἀνακαλούσῃ ἢ τὴν τίττην ὑπολειφθεῖσαν εὐρεῖν πειρωμένη, τάχα ποῦ τι καὶ θερμὸν δράσεις καὶ νεανικὸν ἔργον. οὐδὲν ἂν ἀπεικὸς εἶη καὶ τοιοῦτό τι πραχθῆναι ἐν τῇ τοῦ Πανὸς θυσίᾳ· καὶ γὰρ τοὶ κάκεῖνος ἐρωτικός εὖ μάλα καὶ οἷος ἐπανίστασθαι παρθένοις. (*Ep.* 15)

And maybe if, even when you're drunk, you should happen upon a maiden as she is calling upon her favorite slave or trying to find her nurse who has been left behind, then perhaps maybe you'll do something hot, the kind of thing young men do. It wouldn't be inappropriate even for such a sort of thing to be done in a festival of Pan, for that one, too, you understand, is very erotic and is the sort to rise up against virgins.

Rosenmeyer emphasizes the apparent triviality of the "impolite manners" that give rise to the four letters between Kallipides and Knemon: "One letter on such a subject is certainly readable, but three or four letters, which lead to *aporia* as neither side wins the argument, are more difficult to appreciate."³³ But the letters are not just about impolite manners, and the source of the conflict is hardly trivial. Knemon has deliberately set himself apart from his community, an act incomprehensible to Kallipides, who tries to reintegrate his putatively savage neighbor within the social fabric. The *θυσία* in honor of the god Pan is the quintessential expression of rustic communal life, and so therefore the ideal context in which to tame Knemon's unsocial character, to make him feel like one of the community.

³³ Ibid.

But in his invitation to the *θυσία*, Kallipides ends up revealing the animal-like behavior of his purportedly civilized fellow rustics, perhaps as the very means of socializing Knemon and persuading him to join in the festivities. At the *θυσία*, Knemon will perhaps find an opportunity for rape, an opportunity, in other words, for giving expression to his animal nature. The reader will recall that the god who presides over the *θυσία*, the one who is “very erotic” and “the sort to rise up against virgins,” is himself half-human and half-goat and is representative of the animal nature in humans. The sexual assault of a virgin is “the kind of thing young men do,” implying that Kallipides is familiar with the licentious behavior of rustic youths like Simulos’ son (*Ep.* 10) and perhaps also with the sexual aggression of a character like Khremes (*Ep.* 9), both of whom were also animalized by their inability to control sexual desire. Rustics are supposed to have a tame or civilized character (τὸ ἡμερον τοῦ τρόπου, *Ep.* 13). The Panic *θυσία*, however, offers a place and time where the community of rustics is complicit with and forgiving of such animal behavior, as Kallipides explains that “It wouldn’t be inappropriate even for such a sort of thing to be done in a festival of Pan.” The community of rustics, in other words, welcomes sexual *akolasia*, and so the putatively savage Knemon, too, should feel welcome.

In *Ep.* 16, the final letter of the correspondence as we have it, Knemon remains unpersuaded. He was not charmed by Kallipides’ description of the festival and the social world of the rustics, whom he flees as enemies. Nor can he understand the allure of Dionysus: “And I am suspicious of wine, too, as it is terribly powerful at plotting against and attacking one’s judgment” (ὑφορώμαι δὲ καὶ τὸν οἶνον ὡς ἐπιβουλεῦσαι καὶ ἐπιθέσθαι γνώμῃ δεινῶς καρτερόν). Knemon reveres the gods, Pan included, but he observes an appropriate religious distance; sacrifice itself he avoids, probably because of the orgiastic revels that it inspires. He is outraged that Kallipides would try to entice him with the promise of flute girls and songs, “and fine, too, that you propose the following: to dance and have hot intercourse with a maiden! I think you would even leap into fire and somersault into knives” (καλὰ δέ σου κἀκεῖνα, ὀρχήσασθαι καὶ ὀμιλῆσαι κόρη θερμότατα. σὺ μὲν μοι δοκεῖς κἄν ἐς πῦρ ἄλασθαι κἄν ἐς μαχαίρας κυβιστῆσαι). The line is a quotation from an episode in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, when Socrates criticizes Kritoboulos for having stolen a kiss from the son of Alcibiades. In this, Socrates says, Kritoboulos proved himself most reckless: “this man would even somersault into knives and leap into fire” (οὗτος κἄν εἰς μαχαίρας κυβιστῆσειε κἄν εἰς πῦρ ἄλοιτο), since a boy’s kiss, as poisonous as the bite from a venomous spider, reduces

the lover to slavery.³⁴ By writing about his abstention from wine and erotic pleasure in this way, Knemon stylizes himself as a rustic philosopher striving to cultivate judgment and self-control. From this perspective it is not Knemon who appears to be an uncivilized savage, but Kallipides, who by contrast promotes a communal loosening of inhibitions and sexual indulgence lacking in judgment. Despite the Socratic gloss of his epistolary self-presentation, Knemon nevertheless also satisfies his reader's expectation of him as an *agrios*: for what Kallipides has suggested, Knemon declares "I would even eat you raw" (κἄν ὦμοῦ πασαίμην σου), thus assimilating himself to savage creatures that do not even bother to cook their food like civilized humans.³⁵ Unlike in Menander's *Duskolos*, Aelian's Knemon is not reintegrated within the community, and this departure from the comic model is noteworthy.³⁶ In this pastiche of the New Comic and philosophical traditions, Knemon depicts himself as both an ethical exemplar and a wild animal that remains outside social conventions.

The philosophical turn in Knemon's self-presentation brings to mind Aelian's similar self-fashioning in the epilogue of the *NA*, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Aelian of course does not boast that he could eat his sophistic enemies raw, but he does share with Knemon a rejection of the conventional life that is expected of him. Knemon's unwillingness to participate in the Panic θυσία parallels Aelian's own unwillingness to participate in the careerist posturing of his fellow sophists, and just as Knemon's philosophically minded retreat makes him *agrios*, incomprehensibly savage, Aelian's own turn to the solitary acts of reading and writing is also a turn toward animal life. Aelian knows that his fellow sophists will scoff at him for his choice of subject, but he defends himself in the epilogue of the *NA*:

ἐγὼ δὲ ὑπὲρ τε ἁλωπέκων καὶ σαυρῶν καὶ κανθάρων καὶ ὄφεων καὶ λεόντων καὶ τί δρᾷ πάρδαλις καὶ ὅπως πελαργὸς φιλόστοργον καὶ ὅτι ἀηδῶν εὖστομον καὶ πῶς φιλόσοφον ἑλέφας καὶ εἶδη ἰχθύων καὶ γεράνων ἀποδημίας καὶ δρακόντων φύσεις καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ὅσα ἤδε ἡ συγγραφή πεπονημένως ἔχει καὶ φυλάττει, περιέρχομαι . . . (*NA*, ep., p. 430, lines 12–18)

But I myself, on behalf of foxes and lizards and dung-beetles and serpents and lions, and what the leopard does and how the stork is an affectionate creature and that the nightingale is a melodious creature and what a philosophical

³⁴ X. *Mem.* 1.3.9.

³⁵ Cf. Men. *Dysc.* 467–468. Claiming that an enemy eats raw flesh as a way of marking his/her savage quality is a theme that goes back to Homer; see *Il.* 4.31–36 and *Od.* 9.287–293.

³⁶ Cf. Men. *Dysc.* 946–969.

creature the elephant is and the shapes of fish and the migrations of cranes and the natures of snakes and the rest, whatever this book elaborately contains and preserves, these I survey.

Aelian's turn toward animal life may seem incomprehensible if not savage to sophists who are more interested in declaiming in palaces and to philosophers who pursue putatively more lofty subjects. But whatever the cost to his reputation, Aelian implicates himself in animal life with zeal and without regret. As refined literary fragments demonstrating compositional variety and a persistent interest in the intertwining of human and animal lives, the collection of *Rustic Letters* reflects in miniature the more expansive *De natura animalium*, Aelian's greatest work.

Conclusion

The *Rustic Letters* are probably the earliest of Aelian's surviving works, but this is by no means certain. They reflect literary trends of the Second Sophistic, especially the cultivation of a simple Attic style, the recreation of a rustic Greek past, the popularity of literary collections and compilations, and an interest in fictional epistolography. Aelian may have been primarily influenced by the epistolary collection of Alciphron, but there is no scholarly consensus on this point. Apart from the influence of individual writers either past or contemporary, Aelian would have gained experience in *êthopoia* during his rhetorical education in Praeneste or Rome. If the *Rustic Letters* were an early product of his literary career, composed perhaps in the 190s, then they may have been the primary basis for Philostratus' remark in the *Lives of the Sophists* that Aelian could speak the Athenian dialect as well as anyone from the Attic heartland (VS 624).

In one sense, the Athenian farmers' entanglement with animal life is unproblematic. Thus in *Ep.* 2, Komarkhides casually expresses his affection for the animals on Dropides' farm without concern that this affection will in any way diminish his character. Similarly, in *Ep.* 5 Baiton rhapsodizes about his stolen bees, which he imagines as his daughters. Anthropomorphism of this kind contributes to the rustic charm of the letters. In another sense, though, entanglement with animal life may be taken as the sign of an uncivilized character. Consequently, one marks one's humanity by one's distance from or superiority over animal life. Thus in *Ep.* 9, Khremes thinks he gets the better of the soldier Thrasuleon who interrupted his sexual encounter with a courtesan by implying that the soldier's animal

name, “tangled up with a wild beast,” reflects his animal nature. Likewise in *Ep.* 10, Phileriphos objects to the base, animal sexuality of Simulos’ son: if he is going to act like an animal, then Phileriphos will treat him like an animal, proposing to castrate the boy as one would a goat or a boar. The humor and irony in the letters, though, is that characters like Khremes and Phileriphos appear to be unaware of their own animal behavior.

Finally, in the exchange of letters between Kallipides and Knemon (*Ep.* 13–16) it is clear that rustic subjectivity is formed not only by contrast with a presumed urban other, but also by the contrast between tame and savage variations of rusticity. Kallipides claims tameness of character (τὸ ἡμερον τοῦ τρόπου, *Ep.* 13) for himself and for his fellows who adhere to certain conventions of rustic life, especially being a friendly neighbor and participating in the communal *θυσία* in honor of Pan. Knemon is, by contrast, “savage” (ἄγριος), a characterization that he himself does not reject. But the correspondence reveals that the terms are open to contestation, as the putatively savage Knemon reveals himself to be a moral philosopher as much as a misanthrope, while Kallipides reveals the licentious, animal sexuality at the heart of the rustics’ communal worship of Pan.

The *Rustic Letters* and the *NA* have much in common. Both are collections of refined literary fragments and both reflect an intense interest in the relationship between human and animal. Furthermore, Knemon’s rejection of the conventions of rustic society by self-consciously becoming animal (in writing, at least) parallels Aelian’s own self-portrayal in the epilogue of the *NA*, discussed in [Chapter 1](#). As the reader imagines Knemon retreating from the drunken revels of his fellow rustics, perhaps she may also imagine him alone in his country house composing a monumental animal miscellany.

*The hazards of variety***Aelian and *poikilia***

Despite his paradoxical, countercultural self-portrait, Aelian's compilatory approach to literature was typical of his time. There was a long tradition of literary miscellanies preceding Aelian, including works by Callimachus, Varro, Seneca, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, Pamphila of Epidauros, Favorinus of Arelate, Aulus Gellius, Apuleius, Julius Pollux, Achilles Tatius, and Galen.¹ Similar texts written during or shortly after Aelian's own lifetime include Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*; Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*; Julius Africanus' *Kestoi*; Censorinus' collection *De die natali*, in honor of his patron Quintus Caerellius; and perhaps Lucius Ampelius' *Liber memorialis*.² The disordered miscellany in particular was apparently so much a literary fixture by the mid second century CE that Aulus Gellius, in his preface to the *Noctes Atticae*, famously catalogues thirty titles such as "The Muses," "The Woods," "The Field," and even a "Fruit Basket" (Πάγκαρπον) – all carefully thought up by his literary predecessors to evoke the disorder of their own miscellaneous collections.³

Given the abundance of such texts composed in the second and third centuries, it is worth considering briefly what historical circumstances

¹ On the Aristotelian *De mirabilibus auscultationibus*, see Vanotti 2007. On Varro, see Cardauns 2001. On Seneca, see Gross 1989, Gauly 2004, and Hine 2006. On Pliny, see Beagon 1992, 2005, and Murphy 2004. On Plutarch, see König 2007a. On Pamphila, see Holford-Strevens 2005: 34–35 and König and Whitmarsh 2007. On Favorinus, see Barigazzi 1993, Gleason 1995, Holford-Strevens 1997, and Keulen 2009: 97–111. On Gellius, see Anderson 1994, Holford-Strevens 2005, Gunderson 2009, and Keulen 2009. On Apuleius, see Mras 1949, Opeku 1974, Sandy 1997, Harrison 2000, Marangoni 2000, Lee 2005, and La Rocca 2005. On Julius Pollux, see Swain 1996: 47, 54, 97, 398; Conti Bizarro 2004; Theodorides 2004; Bearzot, Landucci, and Zecchini 2007. On Achilles Tatius, see Morales 2004. On Galen, see Flemming 2007.

² On Clement, see Wyrwa 1983, Mayor 1993, and Itter 2009. On Athenaeus, see Braund and Wilkins 2000, McClure 2003, and Jacob 2013. On Julius Africanus, see Wallraff and Mecella 2009. On Censorinus, see Hofmann 1891, Rapisarda 1991, and Parker 2007. On Ampelius, see Whitmarsh 2007 and König 2010.

³ Gel. pref. 5–9. See Gunderson 2009: 18–44, and Keulen 2009: 24–27.

encouraged this genre.⁴ The answer must surely be based in part on the flourishing urban culture of the Empire, an extension and intensification of the Alexandrian phenomenon of the Hellenistic age. The city of Ptolemaic Alexandria, where the archive of Greek learning and literature was institutionalized in the city's great library, allowed compiler-artists such as Callimachus and Eratosthenes to thrive and inspired a literary aesthetic that would proliferate in the first centuries of the Roman Empire and indeed throughout Byzantium. The interest in encyclopedic texts in Rome may also, according to Claudia Moatti, have been a literary response to the crisis of social breakdown and the political upheavals witnessed during the final phases of the Republic, a collective attempt to recover, stabilize, and (re)order the knowledge of the world in the face of radical change and disruption.⁵ Alternatively, we may think of these miscellanies and encyclopedias metaphorically as textual maps of the Imperial world, inextricably implicated in Rome's expansive geopolitical domination. Rome brought about the "subsumption of the multifarious nations of the earth under a single political framework," and, as envisioned by König and Whitmarsh, these encyclopedic texts, each ordering knowledge in its own way, mimic the Imperial paradigm.⁶

Pliny's *Natural History* is a perfect example. While there is to be found within individual chapters of the work a structural aesthetic of "intricacy and variety,"⁷ the structure of the whole reflects a careful division of the cosmos: the six opening books on astronomy and geography give way to books on zoology, including human animals (7–11); then botany and the medical uses of plants (12–32); and then finally metals, mining, and minerals (33–37). As Trevor Murphy puts it, Pliny's *Natural History* "reconstitutes the world as a series of classifications built on contrasts or antitheses."⁸ A work of uncertain date but composed during or after the reign of Hadrian, Lucius Ampelius' *Liber memorialis* also reflects the imperial impulse for imposing an order of classifications upon the cosmos as well as for representing Rome as the climax of human civilization.⁹ The work's carefully ordered structure is reinforced by the imperial confidence of Ampelius' narrative voice: there is, according to Whitmarsh, "an answer to everything. . . . Ampelius presents himself as the vehicle of authoritative, uncontentious, definitive knowledge."¹⁰

⁴ Cf. Sidebottom 2007: 72.

⁵ Moatti 1997.

⁶ König and Whitmarsh 2007: 35–36.

⁷ Murphy 2004: 29.

⁸ *Ibid.* 30. See also Beagon 1992 and 2005.

⁹ A second-century date is proposed by Arnaud-Lindet 1997: 2302 n. 2, though Whitmarsh 2007: 44 n. 62 is satisfied only by the secure internal evidence (a reference to Hadrian's Olympicion, 8.25) allowing a *terminus post quem* of 131–132.

¹⁰ Whitmarsh 2007: 45.

But there was also a body of Greek compilatory texts that rejected the grand ordering systems imposed by the Latin texts of Pliny and Ampelius, and in these Greek works by authors such as Favorinus, Achilles Tatius, Athenaeus, and even the Christian writers Clement of Alexandria and Julius Africanus, the aesthetic of *poikilia* is a recurring theme.¹¹ The most elaborate of these is of course Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*, but even in this work of maximal abundance there is an important overarching organizational conceptualization: the literary symposium, a popular framework for the compilation of miscellaneous knowledge from the fourth century BCE. Mimicking intellectual conversation lubricated by copious amounts of wine, this genre was an ideal vehicle for accommodating and capitalizing on the organic flow and semantic drift of the miscellanist's compilatory aesthetic.¹² Aelian almost certainly knew the work of Athenaeus, who transplanted the Greek symposium to Rome and populated it with a cast of prominent literati. Aelian also probably even used the *Deipnosophistai* as a source for his own literary compilations.¹³ One can thus easily imagine Aelian structuring the *NA* too as a symposium along the lines of the massive compilatory work that preceded and possibly even inspired him. But instead Aelian pursued a different structural principle, and this difference is noteworthy. To have written a sympotic conversation on the character of animals would have been to subsume his natural subject matter beneath the Hellenic social context par excellence, whereas Aelian's stated intention throughout is to demonstrate the value of animals in their own right, often even as an indictment of the debased existence of humans.

Two other texts that beg comparison with Aelian's *NA* are the contemporary didactic poems on fishing and hunting: Oppian's *Halieutika* and the *Kunêgetika* by an unknown Syrian author whose name was possibly also Oppian.¹⁴ There are numerous similarities in content between Aelian's work and these didactic poems, and it is generally believed that all three works relied on common sources, though it is chronologically possible that Aelian relied on the *Halieutika*; it remains unsettled to what degree, if any, Aelian and the poet of the *Kunêgetika*, contemporaries of one another, influenced each other.¹⁵ And yet, despite these similarities of

¹¹ *Ibid.* 46. On the *Historia summikta* of Achilles Tatius, see *Souda* α 4695.

¹² On the unity of the sympotic form with the content of the *Deipnosophistai*, see Romeri 2000.

¹³ See Stamm 2003: 46–58, Kindstrand 1998: 2975, and Whitmarsh 2007: 49.

¹⁴ On the authorship and background of the Oppianic poems, see Mair 1928: xiii–lxxx, Bartley 2003: 1–5, Benedetti 2005, and Whitby 2007. On Oppian and the epic tradition see Kneebone 2007. On the relationship between the *Halieutika* and Oppian's Cilician background, see Lytle 2011.

¹⁵ On the sources of Aelian and Oppian, see Wellmann 1888, 1891a, 1891b, 1892, 1894, 1895, 1896, 1907, 1916, 1917. On Aelian's use of the *Halieutika*, see Keydell 1937.

content, the differences are noteworthy. The *Halieutika* was composed in honor of an emperor called simply Antoninus and his son, who is not named, though the pair is now generally accepted to be Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus. Internal evidence¹⁶ suggests that the son held the imperial power jointly with the father, thus dating the poem between 176 and 180, when Marcus Aurelius died. The *Kunêgetika*, on the other hand, boasts as its addressee the emperor Caracalla, “sweet child of Ausonian Zeus, Antoninus, whom great Domna bore to great Severus” (Opp. C. 1.3–4), placing the poem some time after Caracalla took sole power, thus between 212 and 217. These addressees are significant for comparison of the poems with Aelian’s text, for it is clear that their motivations could not be more different. Although all three texts deal with the world of animals and the relationships between animals and humans, Aelian’s collection presents itself as the product of one who has turned away from the centers of political power and who has renounced social ambition, whereas the poems on fishing and hunting speak directly to imperial power, whether or not their intended addressees ever actually read the poems.

There are important structural differences between Aelian’s collection and the didactic poems too. The poets of the *Halieutika* and *Kunêgetika* were both influenced by the *poikilos* aesthetic: not only does each poet wander casually from topic to topic, or from creature to creature within individual books, but the didactic flow of the poems is regularly broken up by elaborate epic similes, in what Adam Bartley has aptly termed the poetic “ornamentation of the technical discourse.”¹⁷ This ornamentation is precisely what makes the poems such a pleasure to read. And yet the narrative *poikilia* of each poem is tempered by a large-scale organizational scheme. The five books of the *Halieutika* treat, in order, (1) the various species of fish, (2) the interactions of different fish, (3) the equipment and skills required of the fisherman, (4) the fisherman’s exploitation of the passions and desires of his prey, and (5) the hunting of sea monsters. The four books of the *Kunêgetika* are likewise divided by topic: (1) an account of the hunter, his skills, and equipment, (2) descriptions of the hunter’s prey, (3) “the saw-toothed assembly of flesh-eating beasts and the tusked races” (Opp. C. 3.5–6), and (4) an account of the hunt itself.¹⁸ The large-scale organizational schemes of the Oppianic poems make the *poikilia* of Aelian’s *NA* look far more thoroughly haphazard.

¹⁶ Opp. H. 2.682. ¹⁷ Bartley 2003: 16.

¹⁸ On the structure of the *Kunêgetika*, see Whitby 2007: 127.

Rejecting topical organization and turning away from even such a dominant cultural practice as the Greek symposium as its organizing principle, the *NA* is therefore pure compilation, stripped of any overarching, contextualizing framework apart from Aelian's remarks in the preface and epilogue. The fruits of the author's research and rewriting are strung together, one after the other, in an arbitrary sequence of chapters defying logical classification and orderly division. Aelian does not, it should be said, strive for true randomness in the structure of the *NA*. An entire sequence of entries, for example, may treat a similar zoological or geographic topic (there might be a whole sequence of entries about horses, say, or about the various creatures of Libya), and sometimes sequential entries are drawn from a common source.¹⁹ Often enough, however, the juxtaposition of entries has no apparent logic and thus awakens and challenges the reader's hermeneutic activity. Rejecting any large-scale principle of organization, Aelian opts instead for a more organic approach that is mimetic of the natural world.

And yet, despite the established practice of literary *poikilia* in Greek literature of the Roman Empire, Aelian nevertheless feels the need to defend himself. Anticipating the criticism of those who will be opposed to the disorganized quality of his text, in the epilogue to the *NA* Aelian carefully explains that his compositional choice was deliberate: avoiding a topical organization by individual animal, he says that instead, "I mixed up even the varied contents in a varied manner" (ἀνέμιξα δὲ καὶ τὰ ποικίλα ποικίλως, *NA* ep., p. 431, line 3). First, Aelian once again claims for himself an intellectual independence, refusing literary and artistic fashions: "regarding my own personal style, I am not the slave of another man's judgment and wish, and I deny that I must follow someone else wherever he might lead me" (τὸ ἐμὸν ἴδιον οὐκ εἶμι τῆς ἄλλου κρίσεως τε καὶ βουλῆσεως δοῦλος, οὐδέ φημι δεῖν ἔπεσθαι ἐτέρῳ, ὅποι μ' ἂν ἀπάγῃ, lines 6–8). We should not take for granted as a rhetorical commonplace Aelian's invocation of the discourse of slavery to assert his artistic freedom.²⁰ Independence and self-mastery are prominent themes in many of Aelian's animal narratives, and when we consider the latent and sometimes explicit political orientation of many of these stories (see [Chapter 9](#)), we may read Aelian's declaration of independence here as part of his ongoing negotiation of the terms of intellectual freedom amid the political and cultural domination of Severan Rome.

¹⁹ On the structural variety of the *VH*, see Johnson 1997 and König 2007b: 143–144.

²⁰ Cf. Gellius' emphasis on authority in the preface to the *Attic Nights*; see Keulen 2009: 18–19.

Aelian then explains the rationale behind the unorganized structure of his book:

δεύτερον δὲ τῷ ποικίλῳ τῆς ἀναγνώσεως τὸ ἐφοικόν θηρῶν καὶ τὴν ἐκ τῶν ὁμοίων βδελυγμίαν ἀποδιδράσκων, οἷον εἰ λειμῶνά τινα ἢ στέφανον ὠραῖον ἐκ τῆς πολυχροίας, ὡς ἀνθροσφόρων τῶν ζώων τῶν πολλῶν, ᾧ ἤθην δεῖν τήνδε ὑφᾶναι τε καὶ διαπλέξαι τὴν συγγραφὴν. (*NA* ep., p. 431, lines 8–12)

Second: since by means of variety I was hunting for something that would entice reading and I was avoiding the nausea that comes from uniformity, I thought I should weave and intertwine this collection as if it were a meadow or garland in bloom with polychromatic variety, the many animals acting like flower-bearers.

The metaphor with which Aelian begins this passage is interesting. By figuring himself as author-hunter (θηρῶν), he turns the tables on contemporary readers who happen also to be hunters in the real world, for those same readers Aelian now imagines as his own prey, enticed into his prose-nets by the lure of the pleasure that comes from *poikilia*. Aelian's readers are thus assimilated to the unfortunate animal prey that he depicts within the *NA*, creatures like the *skaros* fish (1.2) or the *porphura* (7.34), caught because of their own sexual incontinence and gluttony respectively.²¹ If he is not careful, in other words, the reader's indulgence in *poikilia* can transform him into a slave of pleasure.

Furthermore, I mentioned above that by rejecting an overarching narrative framework such as an imaginary symposium Aelian's text was approximating a randomness and organic flow that is mimetic of the natural world. Yet a striking feature of Aelian's natural imagery in the above explanation is its very artificiality. He imagines his composition of the *NA* first as a meadow, a plot of earth that yields its own natural growth. But then immediately Aelian changes his mind: now his text is not a meadow but a garland, something that must be woven and braided by human hands. The image therefore emphasizes the artful shaping of nature by the writer's literary craft. The additional image of the book's many animals acting as flower-bearers further reinforces the artificiality, one might even say the contrived quality of Aelian's literary project.

But *poikilia* entails for Aelian more than a pleasing variety in the display of his scholarly research; it also refers to the writer's artfully constructed prose, and in particular to his rich, allusive use of language. The rare poetic word for flower-bearers (ἀνθροσφόρων) in the above passage, for example, is

²¹ French 1994: 265–266.

worth considering. The word is not unanimously attested in the surviving manuscripts (the similar variants ἀνθεοφόρων, ἀνθεοφόρος, ἀνθεοφόρον, and ἀνθηφόρων are also attested), but the thirteenth-century manuscript in which ἀνθεςφόρων does appear is considered a very good witness of the text, and this is the reading chosen both by Hercher and by García Valdés, Llera Fueyo, and Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén. Intertextual analysis strengthens this reading: the adjective ἀνθεςφόρος appears in two relevant passages from Euripides, and then only twice more in the *Onomastikon* of the second-century CE scholar Julius Pollux. The first messenger in Euripides' *Bakkhai* uses the word to describe the garlands of flowering bindweed (στεφάνους μίλακος ἀνθεςφόρου, 703) with which the Theban women crown themselves on Mount Kithairon, and the messenger from *Iphigeneia at Aulis* uses the word to describe the flowering meadows (λείμακος ἀνθεςφόρους, 1544) sacred to Artemis. Aelian's use of the word in conjunction with the alternative images of a meadow or garland in bloom (λειμώνά τινα ἢ στέφανον ὠραῖον) triggers a strong intertextual relationship with the Euripidean passages. In other words, the associative language of Aelian's prose garland sends out rhizomatic shoots, tendril-like, to connect with various other poetic and literary networks.

And the specific allusions to Euripides here are more than merely imagistic, for both Euripidean passages describe the miraculous substitution of animals for human subjects. In the *Bakkhai*, the women who crown themselves with garlands of ivy, oak, and flowering bindweed are the same women who, in the verses immediately before, had abandoned their own infants in the city and were suckling baby deer and wolves in their arms (699–702). In *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, the grove and flowering meadows of Artemis are the site where Agamemnon's daughter by divine intervention is replaced on the sacrificial altar by a hind. The ending of the play is notoriously corrupt, but Aelian himself has preserved the fragmentary evidence for the miraculous appearance of Artemis at the end of the play (*NA* 7.39).²² Even if the description of Artemis' flowering meadows (λείμακος ἀνθεςφόρους) occurs at the very beginning of a scene with dubious authorship,²³ we might reasonably assume that Aelian was familiar with multiple endings of the play that were then in circulation and that he himself was not troubled by the authenticity of the messenger speech. The scene's graphic illustration of the violence that was inflicted upon the innocent hind would certainly have haunted the author of the *NA*: "for a hind was lying upon the earth gasping . . . the goddess' altar was completely

²² See Ameduri 1975. ²³ See West 1981: 73–76.

splattered with its blood” (ἔλαφος γὰρ ἀσπαίρουσ’ ἔκειτ’ ἐπὶ χθονὶ . . . ἧς αἵματι βωμὸς ἐρραίνετ’ ἄρδην τῆς θεοῦ, 1587–1589). We recall also that in the *Bakkhai*, the peaceful image of the Theban women nurturing baby animals gives way to the maenadic hunt in which Agaue and her companions mistake Pentheus for a lion and tear him limb from limb (1114–1136). The Euripidean intertexts reveal that beneath Aelian’s oddly contrived poetic image of animals bearing the flowers of a prose garland there are violent literary echoes, an interpretation that is borne out when one considers also the notice in Julius Pollux’s *Onomastikon* that the Anthesphoria (Ἀνθεςφορία) was the name for the Sicilian festival commemorating the rape of Persephone (1.37.4).

It is at this point in the epilogue to the *NA* that Aelian asserts his position, mentioned in [Chapter 1](#), that the scholarly pursuit of animals is more noble than actually destroying them. But the question of the violence directed against animals has already been suggested in the previous sentence by the allusions to the *Bakkhai* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis* in Aelian’s conjuring of the artificial image of animals acting as flower bearers for his textual meadow or garland. The violent subtext in this image, evoking human/animal sacrifice and a corruption of the ideal of man living in harmony with nature, is, I argue, connected to Aelian’s anxiety, not just about his choice of subject matter, but also about his aesthetic choice to shape the entire collection according to the principles of variety and disorder. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that Aelian has already employed violent imagery in the epilogue to the *NA*, when he describes his ambitious peers and critics as being like the blade of a sword, “whetted for honors and influence” (τεθηγμένων ἐς τιμὰς τε καὶ δυνάμεις, *NA* ep., p. 430, lines 9–10). That literary *poikilia*, so well established by the third century CE, would trigger such defensiveness may seem surprising, but a survey of the literary tradition shows that the tendency towards excessive rhetorical or compositional variety could always be taken as a sign of superficiality, of a lack of discipline, and of effeminate tastes.

A brief history of literary *poikilia*

In Homer, the adjective *poikilos* means “pattern-woven,” and the literal weaving of Helen and Andromache in the *Iliad* and Penelope in the *Odyssey* serves as a metaphor for the crafting of epic narrative.²⁴ The *poikilos* aesthetic was also prominent in the lyric poetry of the Archaic

²⁴ Nagy 2010: 273–310.

period. Sappho's best-known poem even begins with "immortal Aphrodite of the richly worked throne," or in Nagy's alternative rendering "Our Lady of the varied pattern-woven floral love charms"²⁵ (ποικιλόθρον' ἄθανάτ' Ἀφρόδιτα, 1.1), an invocation that serves as a miniature verse manifesto of the aesthetic taste for the variegated, dappled style.²⁶ By the fourth century BCE, however, *poikilia* had begun to arouse suspicions. While defending his long career and describing the elevated rhetoric of contemporary orators, Isocrates says that they "set forth facts in language that is rather poetic and ornate" (τῇ λέξει ποιητικωτέρῃ καὶ ποικιλωτέρῃ τὰς πράξεις δηλοῦσιν, *Antidosis* 47), and that "everyone, on hearing these speeches, delights no less than when they hear poetry composed in meter" (Ὦν ἅπαντες μὲν ἀκούοντες χαίρουσιν οὐδὲν ἥττον ἢ τῶν ἐν τοῖς μέτροις πεποιημένων). This pleasurable, poetic, and ornate style was practiced and taught by Isocrates himself, and yet that style clearly needed to be defended, for the speech known as the *Antidosis* was conceived as a response to an opponent who slandered the power of Isocrates' discourses as being harmful (διαβάλλοντος δὲ τὴν τῶν λόγων τῶν ἐμῶν δύναμιν, 5; εἰ βλαβεροῖς χρῶμαι τοῖς λόγοις, 51).²⁷ Isocrates represented himself as a Socratic figure, a scapegoat charged with endangering the youth of Athens. But whereas Socrates' official charges had a religious basis,²⁸ Isocrates writes of his varied rhetorical style as being itself a source of fear in Athens.

This mentality had been illustrated most clearly in the previous century by the sophist Prodikos of Keos, who made a career wandering the Greek world and delivering one of his most famous orations, the "Choice of Herakles."²⁹ In the story, famously recounted in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Herakles is encountered by two women. The one, Virtue (Arete), is sparingly adorned with moral integrity, modesty, and prudence, all indicated visually by her white gown. The other woman, Vice (Kakia), was the image of *poikilia*, done up in deceptive make-up and draped in a gown that boasted all the colors of flowers in springtime. Though Vice promises great pleasure, Herakles obviously chooses Virtue.³⁰ In the fourth century, Aristotle provides a philosophical explanation why the style that produces pleasure by means of variety could possibly be thought to be harmful: "change of all things is sweet, as the poet says,³¹ because of some vice. For

²⁵ Nagy 2010: 276.

²⁶ On literary *poikilia* in the Archaic period, with special attention to the poetic representation of animals, see Fowler 1984.

²⁷ Mirhady and Too 2000: 201–205. ²⁸ Pl. *Ap.* 24b8–c1.

²⁹ On the relationship of literary *poikilia* to musical theory, see Briand 2006: 43–45.

³⁰ X. *Mem.* 2.1.21–22; Philostr. *VS* 482.18–23, 496. ³¹ E. *Or.* 234.

just as a man given to change is a man of vice, so too is the nature that is in need of change, for it is neither simple nor appropriate" (*EN* 1154b28–31). Aristotle does not have literary *poikilia* specifically in mind, and he clearly argues that certain pleasures may in fact be beneficial and "natural."³² Nevertheless, readers and writers who enjoy the varied style, especially in its more exaggerated forms, may, according to this logic, be assimilated to those who are "given to change" (εὐμετάβολοι) and are therefore themselves "people of vice" (πονηροί).

In the following centuries, Aristotle's negative ethical figuration of pleasure derived from variety began to have an impact on historiography, as is illustrated in the methodological digression of Polubios, who contrasts the spare, unembellished style of his universal history with the rhetorical and compositional flourishes of more romantic historians (29.12). But such ethical posturing did not prevent later writers from continuing to employ rhetorical and compositional variety, though it did prompt defensiveness regarding their literary choices. In the first century BCE, Diodoros of Sicily explains that he will from time to time allow in his historical *Library* the kind of rhetorical and compositional flourishes criticized by Polubios: "for since history needs to be adorned with *poikilia*, in some places it is necessary to admit the assistance even of such passages" (20.2.1). Dionysius of Halikarnassos, writing his universal history of Rome at the end of the first century BCE, took full advantage of the range of rhetorical devices and compositional modes to create a mixed style (ἐξ ἀπάσης ἰδέας μικτόν, 1.8.3) that appealed to different kinds of readers, "even to those who require constant amusement in the reading of history."³³

By the second century CE, romantic fiction had developed as the prose genre par excellence for just such readers requiring constant amusement, and rhetorical *poikilia* was one of its defining features. Achilles Tatius and Longus even offer ekphrastic passages whose images of flowering trees, meadows, intertwining branches, and wild animals reflect their novels' interest in aesthetic variety.³⁴ In Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Kleitophon* especially, there is a strong association between the *poikilos* literary style and indulgence in excessive emotion. In one of his most sententious moments, the novel's narrator declares that, "Language is the father of all these [emotions] and it is like when a bow hurls and hits its target and sends into the soul its arrows and various missiles (ποικίλα τοξεύματα)" (2.29). Though Achilles' novel celebrates this aesthetic, delight in such passive emotional

³² Arist. *EN* 7.14.1–8 = 1154a8–1154b28.

³³ See also D.H. *Comp.* 11, 12, 16.

³⁴ Ach. Tat. 1.1, 15–19; Longus prologue, 4.2. On *poikilia* in novels, see Morales 2004: 41 and Briand 2006.

suffering represented to more conservative sensibilities the worst kind of vice.

In the literature of the third century, the pervasiveness of *poikilia* did not, however, eradicate its associations with effeminacy. In the *Life of Apollonios*, for example, Philostratus could champion his philosophical hero by likening him to the variable and changing Egyptian god Proteus (ὥς ποικίλος τε ἦν καὶ ἄλλοτε ἄλλος, I.4),³⁵ while in the *Lives of the Sophists* the same author uses the effeminacy of *poikilia* to slander his namesake, Philostratus the Egyptian,

Κλεοπάτρα μὲν συμφιλοσοφοῦντα τῇ βασιλίδι, σοφιστὴν δὲ προσρηθέντα, ἐπειδὴ λόγου ἰδέαν πανηγυρικὴν ἤρμωστο καὶ ποικίλην, γυναικί ξυνών, ἥ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ φιλολογεῖν τρυφήν εἶχεν, ὅθεν καὶ παρῶδουν τινὲς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ τόδε τὸ ἐλεγεῖον·

πανσόφου ὀργὴν ἴσχε Φίλοστράτου, ὃς Κλεοπάτρα
νῦν προσμιλήσας τοῖος ἰδεῖν ἐφάνη. (VS 486)

a philosopher at the side of the queen Cleopatra who was also called a sophist because he adopted the panegyric and ornamental style in the company of a woman for whom even philology itself contained luxurious pleasure. For this reason some people used to parody him with this couplet: “Have the natural impulse of all-wise Philostratus: now that he associates with Cleopatra, he looks like her.”

This ambiguity surrounding *poikilia* can be perceived throughout Aelian’s literary works. For Aelian, rhetorical variety goes beyond the poetic interweaving of mere words and phrases; when he writes that he has “mixed up even the varied contents in a varied manner,” he takes what was originally a pleasurable rhetorical patterning and defines it as the organizing principle of his entire work. Aelian is not explicit on this point, but the preceding survey of *poikilia* in Greek literature and thought makes it clear: the criticism Aelian anticipates is that excessive literary *poikilia* is either the crutch of an undisciplined writer or appeals too much to readerly pleasure, suggesting an overindulgence that is the mark of effeminate tastes. Even Aelian’s attempt to neutralize such implications could, however, be subverted. Although in the epilogue of the *NA* he matter-of-factly defends compositional *poikilia* as a means of enticing the reader, elsewhere in his literary corpus Aelian himself propagates the mentality that the flowery,

³⁵ Cf. Hom. *Od.* 4.454–490. On the Protean qualities of Philostratus himself, see Elsner 2009: 4, 15–18. In the fifth century, Nonnos of Panopolis will evoke Proteus to illustrate both the metamorphic quality of his poem as well the multiform Dionysus himself (1.11–33). Unlike Philostratus, however, Nonnos in the *Dionysiaka* celebrates the effeminacy of his divine epic hero.

variegated style is ethically dubious: *poikilia* is associated with Eastern luxury, tyranny, corrupt urban sophistication, and feminine erotic seduction.³⁶ So potent was the moral and sexual ambiguity of *poikilia* in antiquity that it became a recurring motif in the classicizing literature of the Aesthetes in the nineteenth century, connoting the figure of the androgyne boy and signaling a style associated with male homoeroticism.³⁷

In connection with the ambiguous gendering of his chosen literary style, a word must be said here also about the cultural implications of Aelian's use of artistic *poikilia*. Though Aelian follows a long tradition in using *poikilia* as an element of Eastern stereotype in his accounts of, for example, Alexander the Great's all too easy adoption of Persian luxury or the erotic enticements of a Syrian *hetaira*, one finds nevertheless the following interesting notice in the pages of the *VH*:

Οἱ πάλαί Ἀθηναῖοι ἀλουργῇ μὲν ἡμπείχοντο ἱμάτια, ποικίλους δὲ ἐνέδυνον χιτῶνας· κορύμβους δὲ ἀναδούμενοι τῶν ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ τριχῶν, χρυσοῦς ἐνείροντες αὐταῖς τέττιγας καὶ κόσμον ἄλλον πρόσθετον περιαιπτόμενοι χρυσοῦ προήεσαν. καὶ ὀκλαδίας αὐτοῖς δίφρους οἱ παῖδες ὑπέφερον, ἵνα μὴ καθίζωσιν ἑαυτοὺς εἰκῇ καὶ ὥς ἔτυχε. τοιοῦτοι δὲ ὄντες τὴν ἐν Μαραθῶνι μάχην ἐνίκησαν. (*VH* 4.22)

The ancient Athenians used to wrap themselves in purple garments, and they used to wear embroidered tunics. And they used to go out with their hair bound up on the top of their heads, with golden grasshoppers inserted in, and adorning themselves with additional ornamentation of gold. And their slaves used to provide folding chairs so that they might not have to seat themselves at random and as chance would have it. These are the kind of men who won the battle at Marathon.

The point is an old one, appearing first in the opening pages of Thucydides' *History*,³⁸ but it must have come as a jolt in the context of the Hellenizing culture of the early third century CE, in which writers prized Attic purity above all else and fantasized about earthy rustics as a source of ancient wisdom. Consider, for example, Aelian's *Rustic Letters*, Philostratus' *Heroikos*, his depiction of Agathion, Herodes' Attic "Herakles" (*VS* 552–554), and even Philostratus' remark that Aelian could speak the Athenian dialect as well as anyone from the Attic heartland (*VS* 624).³⁹ It was an unwelcome surprise, therefore, to be reminded that the brave Athenians who were victorious at Marathon were as vulnerable to luxury as Persians,

³⁶ *NA* 5.21.26–31; *VH* 4.22, 9.3, 12.1; *Ep.* 20; fr. 126d Domingo-Forrasté (123.15–18 Hercher).

³⁷ See Dowling 1989 and Laity 1996: 72–79. ³⁸ Th. 1.6. See also Ath. 512b–c.

³⁹ Whitmarsh 2001: 103–108, 2009: 211–212. See also Hodgkinson 2011: 21–58, who argues for an intertextual relationship between the *Heroikos* and Plato's *Phaedrus*.

Syrians, Phoenicians, and Egyptians. Destabilizing the binary schematization between the manly, rustic West and the luxurious East, Aelian's paradoxographical notice makes contemporary readers confront the groundlessness of their nostalgic fantasies. Despite that he may himself from time to time reinforce the old stereotypes, Aelian also energetically explores alternatives, as when he invites his critics to raise a suspicious eyebrow at the fact that such a conservative Roman as himself could be so self-indulgent in his literary tastes.

It is in response to this background of implied suspicion about the effeminacy of his literary persona that Aelian declares his book's masculine usefulness and workmanlike quality. The *NA* is clearly not organized along scientific principles or as a developed philosophical argument, and so apart from indulging in the literary pleasure that the book offers, why would someone want to read a massive collection of anecdotes and curiosities about the animal world? In the preface to the *NA* Aelian offers his book as a kind of manual to some further end: "If this collection seems profitable to anyone, let him use it" (εἰ δέ τῳ καὶ ἄλλῳ φανεῖται ταῦτα λυσιτελεῖν, χρήσθω αὐτοῖς, lines 18–19).⁴⁰ Aelian has in mind here not those with expertise in the study of nature, but precisely the non-specialist, hence his explanation that he has avoided technical vocabulary and "clothed the collected material in everyday language" (περιβαλὼν αὐτοῖς τὴν συνήθη λέξιν, 16–17). But if the book was not for specialists, then who was its intended primary audience? Diane Louise Johnson and Caroline Stamm have argued that Aelian wrote the *VH* for an audience of young men still acquiring *paideia* and training in rhetoric,⁴¹ and the narratives in both the *NA* and the *VH* may well have served students as models for the development of *muthoi* ("fables/myths") or *khreiai*, the "concise" and "well-aimed"⁴² anecdotes that could be incorporated into a speech or employed in an argument to support the speaker's point.⁴³ Even if Aelian himself had turned away from the world of public declamation (a move that in itself put his masculine authority into question), he could nevertheless offer his book as a scholarly contribution to the manly training of future sophists.⁴⁴

Aelian offers, however, another possible reader: addressing anyone who does not find his book particularly useful, he bids him "give it to his

⁴⁰ On "usefulness" in Gellius' preface to the *Attic Nights*, see Gunderson 2009: 22–23 and Keulen 2009: 17–23.

⁴¹ Johnson 1997 and Stamm 2003: 285–286. ⁴² Nicol. 19 Felten (Kennedy 2003: 140).

⁴³ On *muthoi*, see Kennedy 2003: 23–28, 74–75, 96, 133–136, and 177–182. On *khreiai*, see Kennedy 2003: 15–23, 76–77, 97–99, 139–142, 193–196.

⁴⁴ Cf. Sen. *Con.* 1.pr.8–9 and Gunderson 2003: 36–37.

father to cherish and honor” (ἐάτω τῷ πατρὶ θάλλειν τε καὶ περιέπειν, *NA* pr., lines 19–20). The remark suggests a generational gap that is at least as old as the strained father–son relationship between Strepsiades and Pheidippides in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, only here the scenario is transferred from Athens to a contemporary Roman setting.⁴⁵ If the *NA* does not appeal to Rome’s urban society who have no time for such things, then perhaps it will find an audience with their more earthy fathers. Aelian here taps into the contemporary valorization of the rustic wisdom of an older generation, as well as what Erik Gunderson has identified as Roman declamation’s emphasis on paternity.⁴⁶ Writing an animal miscellany, like declamation, might seem like child’s play, but by appealing to the father Aelian reinscribes the authority of his text. But that authority is (as ever) tenuous: even when he imagines the appreciation of the older generation, Aelian’s language betrays indulgence in an intense pleasure, not the practicality of rhetorical training or the authority that comes with acquiring specialized knowledge. The primary meaning of the verb θάλλειν, here applied to the father who will “cherish” Aelian’s book, is to lend heat or warmth, and in poetry it metaphorically denotes erotic passion.⁴⁷ Aelian’s imagery here of heat and burning passion is therefore consistent with his own erotic self-presentation in the epilogue: “passion for learning, a passion that is both an intimate companion and part of my nature, inflames me” (ἐρως με σοφίας ὁ σύνοικός τε καὶ ὁ συμφυῆς ἐξέκαυσεν, *NA* ep., p. 430, lines 7–8).

Answering the critics

Aelian realizes that not everyone will have the same passion for his book, though that is hardly his fault: ultimately there is no accounting for taste, “for not everything to everyone is beautiful, nor to everyone does everything seem worthy of study” (οὐ γὰρ πάντα πᾶσι καλὰ, οὐδὲ ἄξια δοκεῖ σπουδάσαι πᾶσι πάντα, *NA* pr., lines 20–21). Defending his aesthetic and stylistic choices with yet another allusive gesture, Aelian’s remark directs the reader to a specific passage in the discussion of beauty and aesthetic relativism in the Platonic dialogue *Hippias Major*, as Socrates asks his interlocutor:

Ὅμολογήσομεν οὖν τοῦτο, ὦ Ἱππία, πάντα τὰ τῷ ὄντι καλὰ καὶ νόμιμα καὶ ἐπιτηδεύματα καὶ δοξάζεσθαι καλὰ εἶναι καὶ φαίνεσθαι ἀεὶ πᾶσιν, ἢ πᾶν

⁴⁵ *Ar. Nu.* 42–79.

⁴⁶ Gunderson 2003: 228–229.

⁴⁷ *A. Pr.* 590, 650; *S. Tr.* 1082, *El.* 888; Herod. 2.81.

τοῦναντίον ἀγνοεῖσθαι καὶ πάντων μάλιστα ἔριν καὶ μάχην περὶ αὐτῶν εἶναι καὶ ἰδίᾳ ἐκάστοις καὶ δημοσίᾳ ταῖς πόλεσιν; (Pl. *Hp.Ma.* 294c8–294d3)

Shall we agree on this, then, Hippias, that all established customs and practices that are really beautiful are thought to be beautiful and seem to be beautiful always to everyone? Or is it the complete opposite, that they are ignorant and that above all there is great strife and battle about these things, both in private among individual citizens and in public among cities?

The sophist Hippias of course concedes that the second of the two is the case, that what appears beautiful is the source of the greatest discord among men. Their conversation goes on to postulate that that which is useful is the essence of beauty, a possibility that occurred to Aelian when countering his critics: “If this collection seems profitable to anyone, let him make use of it” (εἰ δέ τω καὶ ἄλλω φανεῖται ταῦτα λυσιτελεῖν, χρήσθω αὐτοῖς, *NA* pr., lines 18–19). But that postulate fails too under Socrates’ scrutiny,⁴⁸ and after several more pages of Socrates’ aporetic philosophizing, Hippias has had enough, steadfast now in his belief that what is beautiful for him is to be able to stand up in court or a council chamber or before some political authority and to speak persuasively, securing his own salvation, the salvation of his property, and the salvation of his loved ones.⁴⁹ It will be remembered too that at the beginning of the dialogue, Hippias boasts of how lucrative his profession has been.⁵⁰ Aelian’s allusion to the *Hippias Major* in the preface prepares the reader for the literary persona that emerges in the epilogue, where Aelian claims that he too could have been one of those sophists, a figure like Hippias, raising an arrogant brow and performing in palaces; instead he has retreated into his own world of scholarship and writing. The allusion to the *Hippias Major* also offers a glimpse of the Socratic model upon which Aelian has partially based his literary persona. Responding to Hippias, Socrates has the last word in the dialogue, content with his lot in life that he is always ill spoken of and rebuked by his peers as he travels philosophy’s difficult, lonely path towards truth.⁵¹

Aelian too declares his commitment to truth (φιλή δὲ ἡ ἀλήθειά μοι, *NA* ep., p. 432, line 8), but unlike Socrates, Aelian shifts in multiple directions, depending on the criticism against which he must defend himself. If the aesthetic *poikilia* of his collection seems too florid, lacking in discipline and even effeminate, he may hold up his book as something useful for the student of rhetoric. But should professional sophists scoff at animal narratives as being trivial and hardly useful, Aelian emphasizes the labor

⁴⁸ Pl. *Hp.Ma.* 295–296.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 304a5–304b3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 282e.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 304e3–304e9.

that has been spent and the rhetorical craft that has been perfected in preparing his book: labor and craft that are in fact worthy of the literary giants who preceded him. “And if I was born after the many wise men who came first,” he writes at the end of the prologue, “let not my assigned place in time detract from my praise if I too should offer some knowledge worthy of study for its more than ample research and for its language” (*NA* pr., lines 21–24). Though subject matter and structure may be criticized as self-indulgent, one will at least find in the pages of the *NA* the mark of an energetic scholar and a talented literary stylist.

Aelian concludes his epilogue too by emphasizing his skill and sophistication as a writer:

ὅπως δὲ αὐτὰ εἶπον καὶ σὺν ὅσῳ πόνῳ, τό τε εὐγενὲς τῆς λέξεως ὅποιον καὶ τῆς συνθήκης, τῶν τε ὀνομάτων καὶ τῶν ῥημάτων τὸ κάλλος, ὁπόσοις ἂν μὴ χρῆσθαι πονηροῖς κριταῖς, ἐκείνοι εἴσονται. (*NA* ep., p. 432, lines 9–12)

And in what manner I said these things, and with what labor, both the noble quality of the diction and composition, and the beauty of the words and expressions: however many I might not regard as worthless judges, they will know these things.

In this concluding sentence to the *NA* Aelian bids farewell to his readers with allusion to yet another Euripidean passage, for the final subordinate clause, “however many I might not regard as worthless judges” (ὁπόσοις ἂν μὴ χρῆσθαι πονηροῖς κριταῖς), nearly quotes the words of Orestes in Euripides’ *Elektra*. Sounding every bit the sophist, Orestes defends his sister’s impoverished husband by questioning how anyone might truly distinguish quality of character:

οὐκ ἔστ’ ἀκριβὲς οὐδὲν εἰς εὐανδρίαν
 ἔχουσι γὰρ παραγμὸν αἱ φύσεις βροτῶν.
 ἦδη γὰρ εἶδον ἄνδρα γενναίου πατρός
 τὸ μηδὲν ὄντα, χρηστά δ’ ἐκ κακῶν τέκνα, 370
 λιμόν τ’ ἐν ἀνδρὸς πλουσίου φρονήματι,
 γνώμην δὲ μεγάλην ἐν πένητι σώματι.
 πῶς οὖν τις αὐτὰ διαλαβὼν ὀρθῶς κρινεῖ;
 πλούτῳ; πονηρῷ τάρα χρήσεται κριτῇ.
 ἦ τοῖς ἔχουσι μηδέν; ἀλλ’ ἔχει νόσον 375
 πενία, διδάσκει δ’ ἄνδρα τῇ χρεῖαι κακόν.
 ἀλλ’ εἰς ὅπλ’ ἔλθων; τίς δὲ πρὸς λόγχην βλέπων
 μάρτυς γένοιτ’ ἂν ὅστις ἐστὶν ἀγαθός;
 κράτιστον εἰκῇ ταῦτ’ ἔαν ἀφειμένα.

...

οὐ μὴ φρονήσεθ', οἱ κενῶν δοξασμάτων
πλήρεις πλανᾶσθε, τῇ δ' ὁμιλίᾳ βροτοῦς
κρινεῖτε καὶ τοῖς ἦθεσιν τοὺς εὐγενεῖς;
(E. *El.* 367–385)⁵²

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There's no precision in judging good character, for there is no continuity in human nature. I have seen the son of a noble father be himself a good for nothing, and good children come from wicked parents. I have seen starvation in the heart of a wealthy man, and great intellect in a poor man's body. How then will someone judge correctly when distinguishing between these things? By means of wealth? He'll regard that as a worthless judge indeed. Or by those who have nothing? But poverty carries with it distress and through lack it teaches man to be wicked. Or when one goes into battle? But who, when he faces a spear, would be a good witness of who is a good man? The best thing is to concede that these things are produced at random . . . Will you not be sensible, you who deceive yourselves full of vain fancies, and won't you judge noble men by the company that they keep and by their characters?

Orestes describes wealth as a “worthless judge” of character, and Aelian voices a similar disdain for wealth in the epilogue of the *NA*, where he distinguishes himself from contemporaries who are always on the lookout for profit. But Aelian's allusion to this passage does more than provide a classical precedent for his disdain of wealth. Orestes calls for new criteria in the judgment of “noble men” (βροτοῦς . . . τοὺς εὐγενεῖς), rejecting the traditional bases for moral evaluation – breeding, wealth, poverty, martial valor – all as “vain fancies,” and basing his new morality on individual character and on the character of one's friends. Returning to the concluding sentence of the *NA*, we see that Aelian too calls for a similar redefinition of what counts as “noble.” His allies – those whom he does *not* regard as worthless judges – will know “both the noble (εὐγενές) quality of the diction and composition, and the beauty of the words and expressions.” In the face of his opponents' criticisms, then, Aelian claims for himself nobility of character not on the basis of their evaluative criteria – wealth,

⁵² Both Diogenes Laertius (2.33, see below) and ps.-Longinus (44.12, without citation of author or work) quote line 379. However, a single sixteenth-century manuscript of D. L. (cod. Monacensis gr. 159) cites the source not as Euripides' *Elektra*, but the same poet's lost play *Auge* (ἐν τῇ Αὐγῇ). Long's OCT edition of D. L. does not rely on the testimony of this manuscript, but instead prints the reading of the thirteenth-century cod. Laurentianus 69.13 (ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ, “in his [poem? play?]”). Nevertheless, on the basis of the sixteenth-century manuscript of D. L., Wilamowitz deleted lines 373–379 from the text of Euripides' *Elektra*, while Reeve deletes lines 368–372, and Murray considered lines 383–385 suspect. These lines may well have originated in the *Auge* and somehow snuck into the text of *Elektra*, but there is no reason to doubt that this is the version of the speech from Euripides' *Elektra* with which Aelian was familiar in the third century.

reputation, declamatory skill – but through the art of literary composition. Nobility for Aelian is now a quality of language and structure (συνθήκη) that he equates with the beauty (κάλλος) of his prose. On this reading, *poikilia* too, the very principle guiding the compositional structure of the *NA*, must be understood as an essential ingredient contributing to the work's overall aesthetic nobility.

But even while he attempts to redefine nobility according to his own literary aesthetics, Aelian's allusion to the Euripidean passage also ironically perpetuates the anxiety surrounding the moral integrity of his work. The speech of Orestes from Euripides' *Elektra* was well known in antiquity for its connection to an anecdote about Socrates that was in circulation even when Aelian lived and worked at Rome in the third century CE. Aelian's contemporary Diogenes Laertius tells the story in his *Lives of the Philosophers*:

Εὐριπίδου δ' ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ εἰπόντος περὶ ἀρετῆς,
κράτιστον εἰκῇ ταῦτ' ἔαν ἀφειμένα,

ἀναστὰς ἐξῆλθε, φήσας γελοῖον εἶναι ἀνδράποδον μὲν μὴ εὕρισκόμενον
ἀξιοῦν ζητεῖν, ἀρετὴν δ' οὕτως ἔαν ἀπολωλέναι. (D.L. 2.33)⁵³

And when Euripides in his play said about virtue that, “the best thing is to concede that these things are produced at random,” [Socrates] stood up and walked out, saying that it was laughable to think it worth looking for a slave when he can't be found, but to allow virtue to die in this way.

The very same passage that serves Aelian as a justification for his literary aesthetic was also the cause of Socrates' moral indignation. It will be remembered that in the preface to the *NA*, Aelian represented himself as a Socratic figure, a countercultural pariah rebuked by his Hippias-like peers. But this anecdote reminds that Socrates himself would have bristled at Aelian's apparently radical redefinition of what is noble according to what suits his own tastes. Furthermore, there is a clear affinity between Orestes' assertion that virtues are produced “at random” (εἰκῇ) and the seeming randomness of Aelian's literary *poikilia*. This is the same word that Photios uses to describe the similar compositional style of Pamphila, who wrote her *Historical Notes* “at random (εἰκῇ) and as each thing came to her . . . thinking that mixture and variety (ποικιλίαν) were more pleasant and more graceful than division by single topic (τοῦ μονοειδοῦς).”⁵⁴ Aelian echoes Pamphila's rationale for her artistic choice when he says in the

⁵³ This is the text as it appears in Long's OCT edition of D. L.

⁵⁴ Phot. *Bibl.* 119b30–33. See König and Whitmarsh 2007: 31.

epilogue of the *NA* that, “by means of variety (τῷ ποικίλῳ) I was hunting for something that would entice reading and I was avoiding the nausea that comes from uniformity (ἐκ τῶν ὁμοίων)” (p. 431, lines 8–9). But it is precisely that appearance of randomness in human nature that outrages Socrates: the impossibility of ever being certain in what person virtue will appear creates a morally ambiguous view of the world at odds with Socrates’ commitment to philosophical truth. And so, despite that Aelian himself summons Socrates as his role model for the serious intellectual in a world of career-minded sophists, the figure of Socrates nevertheless haunts cultural memory to remind that Aelian’s literary aesthetic is quite distant from the path of philosophy. For Socrates, nobility and virtue were not just a question of style, to be redefined according to literary tastes, but the objects of serious, challenging philosophical inquiry. It was philosophy, after all, that allowed Socrates finally to appreciate the meaning of the proverb that “all that is beautiful is difficult” (Χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά).⁵⁵

But to this criticism, Aelian would have responded that it was naïve for Socrates or anyone else to think that the creation of artful *poikilia* in a refined literary style is easy. On the contrary, Aelian emphasizes the difficult labor (*ponos*)⁵⁶ required to produce the structural variety and the honeyed prose of his scholarly treasure.

Conclusion

A long, rich tradition of miscellany writing preceded Aelian, and this genre may even be said to be characteristic of Roman Imperial literary expression. Aelian was, however, unique in treating a single topic – animals – but applying to that topic a thoroughly developed stylistic and structural *poikilia*. Aelian’s *NA* rejects completely any large-scale organization by topic, and he also rejects the sympotic framework, since that was too obviously an expression of human culture. Aelian’s structural choice, on the other hand, allows the illusion that the *NA* presents animals on their own terms and not circumscribed by human culture. But Aelian is also self-consciously aware of the literary art required to conjure his illusion of nature.

And yet Aelian also feels the need to defend his compositional choice. That defensiveness is even reflected in literary allusions to Euripides’ *Bakkhai* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis* that evoke themes of human/animal sacrifice and a corruption of the ideal of man living in harmony with nature.

⁵⁵ Pl. *Hp.Ma.* 304e8.

⁵⁶ *NA* pr., lines 17–18; ep., p. 432, line 9.

Despite the fact that *poikilia* was a literary fashion in Imperial Rome, it never completely lost its negative moral associations. The tendency towards excessive rhetorical or compositional variety could always be taken as a sign of superficiality, of a lack of discipline, and of effeminate tastes. This is borne out by a survey of the development of *poikilia* in prose literature from the Classical period to Aelian's day.

Aelian therefore feels compelled to respond to critics who he imagines will target his compositional choice as an artistic and/or moral failure. To these critics, Aelian minimizes the appeal to pleasure inherent in *poikilia* and instead argues for the usefulness of the *NA*; that it will attract older, more conservative readers ("fathers"); and that it is a testament to his own skills as a scholar and writer.

An allusion to the conversation on aesthetics in the Platonic *Hippias Major* figures Aelian as a Roman Socrates, a lonely intellectual in a world filled with career-minded sophists. In the final sentence of the *NA*, Aelian once again emphasizes his writerly achievement, quoting a well-known line from Euripides that reinforces Aelian's redefinition of nobility and virtue as the refinement of a literary art. But that same allusion to Euripides also evokes a famous anecdote about Socrates, who angrily left the theater when confronted by the moral relativism depicted onstage. And so although Aelian attempts to figure himself as an independent intellectual like Socrates, the anxiety persists that Socrates himself would have questioned the philosophical integrity of Aelian's composition. But the scowling Socrates of Aelian's philosophical imagination is not so powerful as to overwhelm the *NA* or Aelian's commitment that the development of literary *poikilia* in a refined style is a worthy endeavor.

*The Hellenized Roman***The birds of Diomedes**

This chapter arises out of the paradox that Aelian was praised by his contemporaries for his commitment to maintaining Roman identity¹ and yet he refuses to self-identify as Roman within the *NA*, distancing himself from important aspects of Roman culture and citing not a single Latin source in the whole collection. An explanation for this paradox is of course Aelian's cultivation of a Greek literary persona. But given that the *NA* offers itself as a critique of contemporary human morality, the question of how Aelian deals with Roman culture in the performance of Greek *paideia* is central to an understanding of the *NA*. This is clear from the collection's programmatic first entry:

Καλεῖται τις Διομήδεια νῆσος, καὶ ἔρωδιούς ἔχει πολλούς. οὗτοι, φασί, τοὺς βαρβάρους οὔτε ἀδικοῦσιν οὔτε αὐτοῖς προσίασιν· ἐὰν δὲ Ἕλληνα κατάρη ξένος, οἱ δὲ θεῖα τινὶ δωρεᾷ προσίασι πτέρυγας ἀπλώσαντες οἷον εἰ χεῖράς τινος ἐς δεξιῶσιν τε καὶ περιπλοκάς. καὶ ἀπτομένων τῶν Ἑλλήνων οὐχ ὑποφεύγουσιν, ἀλλ' ἀτρεμοῦσι καὶ ἀνέχονται, καὶ καθημένων ἐς τοὺς κόλπους καταπέτονται, ὥσπερ οὖν ἐπὶ ξένια κληθέντες. λέγονται οὖν οὗτοι Διομήδους ἐταῖροι εἶναι καὶ σὺν αὐτῷ τῶν ὀπλων τῶν ἐπὶ τὴν Ἰλίου μετεσχηκέναι, εἴτα τὴν προτέραν φύσιν ἐς τὸ τῶν ὀρνίθων μεταβαλόντες εἶδος, ὅμως ἔτι καὶ νῦν διαφυλάττειν τὸ εἶναι Ἕλληνες τε καὶ Φιλέλληνες. (*NA* 1.1)

There is an island said to belong to Diomedes, and it has many shearwaters [long-winged seabirds]. These, they say, neither harm barbarians nor approach them. But if a Greek foreigner puts into port, they by some divine gift approach, unfurling their wings like hands to receive and embrace them. And when Greeks touch them they do not flee, but remain motionless and allow it, and they fly down into their laps when they sit down, as if summoned to a banquet. These then are said to be the companions of Diomedes and to have had a share with him of the arms against Troy; then having

¹ Philostr. *VS* 625.8–9.

changed their former nature into the shape of birds, nevertheless they are said still even now to protect their identity as Greeks and lovers of Greeks.

Most of the time in the *NA*, Aelian does not indicate his literary sources, and in this sense, the entry about the birds of Diomedes is typical; instead we get passive verbs (καλεῖται) or verbs with vague third-person subjects (φασί). A similar passage on the birds of Diomedes is, however, preserved in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder, who cites as his source Juba II King of Mauretania:

Nec Diomedias praeteribo aves. Iuba cataractas vocat, et eis esse dentes oculosque igneo colore cetero candidis tradens . . . uno hae in loco totius orbis visuntur, in insula, quam diximus nobilem Diomedis tumulto atque delubro contra Apuliae oram, fulicarum similes. advenas barbaros clangore infestant, Graecis tantum adulantur miro discrimine, velut generi Diomedis hoc tribuentes, aedemque eam cotidie pleno gutture madentibus pinnis perluunt atque purificant, unde origo fabulae Diomedis socios in earum effigies mutatos. (Plin. *Nat.* 10.126–127)

And I shall not pass over the birds of Diomedes. Juba calls them *cataractae* [diving birds], reporting that they have teeth and eyes the color of fire, but that the rest of them is pure white . . . These birds are seen in only one place on earth: on an island that I have said is noteworthy for the tomb and sanctuary of Diomedes, an island opposite the shore of Apulia. The birds are like coots. They bother barbarian visitors with their screeching, but they fawn upon Greeks with an amazing power of discrimination, as if paying regard to the race of Diomedes. And every day they wash and purify his temple with moistened wings and with full-throated song. This is the origin of the story that the companions of Diomedes had been changed into the shape of birds.

This is an abridged version of the passage as it appears in Pliny, for I have left out a significant amount of information about the birds' social organization, their habitat, and even their fastidiousness about not relieving their bowels or breaking wind within the confines of their dwelling. But these details did not make their way into Aelian's text, and so we have here an opportunity to gauge how Aelian used his sources in natural history.² With the page of Juba's text before him, Aelian appropriated only what he thought would be of cultural value or interest. Excising the bits about the birds living in ditches that they have dug in the earth, Aelian focuses on the more human characteristics of the birds, in particular their fellowship with men. One could say that what was for Juba a trivial aside (*unde origo*

² See Wellmann 1892.

fabulae) becomes for Aelian the substance of his programmatic first entry in the *NA*. Aelian is more interested in the anthropomorphic and fabulist elements in his source than in the scientific. Juba is an important scholarly character in Aelian's collection of animal narratives, and we shall encounter him several more times throughout this book.

What, then, of the *fabula* to which Juba and Aelian allude? Aelian provides the mythological explanation for the birds' curiously philhellenic behavior at the end of the passage: once upon a time, after the Trojan War, these Greek companions of Diomedes changed into birds. The story was of course documented in Greek sources,³ but a Roman audience would have been equally familiar with the story from their own literary tradition, as it was recounted in the two central epics of the Latin canon, Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁴ In Book 11 of the *Aeneid*, King Latinus sits in council with the envoys whom he had dispatched to the city of Arpi to seek military aid from the Greek Diomedes against the invading Trojans. The envoy Venulus recounts Diomedes' reluctance to join in the Italian war against Aeneas: none of the Greeks had an easy time returning from the war at Troy, and Diomedes shared their fate because of the wound that he had inflicted upon the goddess Venus in battle. Punishment was inflicted on his comrades, too:

nunc etiam horribili uisu portenta sequuntur
et socii amissi petierunt aethera pennis
fluminibusque uagantur aues (heu, dira meorum
supplicia!) et scopulos lacrimosis uocibus implent.

(*A.* 11.271–277)

Now even portents follow that are horrible to look at:
my lost comrades have taken to the sky with wings
and as birds they wander about rivers (alas, the dire punishments
of my men!) and they fill the rocks with their tearful voices.

Ovid provides a different explanation for the cause of the men's transformation. There was in Diomedes' army one Acmon (Anvil), a man "bitter for his misfortunes" (*cladibus asper*, 14.485), whose angry outburst, scorning the hatred of the goddess, provokes Venus' anger even more. Acmon's speech is applauded by few of Diomedes' men, and most, according to Diomedes, censure him for his impiety. But when Acmon wanted to respond,

³ Lyc. 594–597; Str. 6.3.9.17–22; Ant.Lib. 37.5–6; Antig. *Mir.* 172. See Papathomopoulos 1968: 154 n. 23 and Forbes Irving 1990: 230–232.

⁴ On the role of Diomedes in Vergil and Ovid, see Papaioannou 2000 and 2004, and Fletcher 2006. See also Rink 1997: 197–198.

vox pariter vocisque via est tenuata, comaeque
 in plumas abeunt, plumis nova colla teguntur
 pectoraque et tergum, maiores bracchia pennas
 accipiunt, cubitique leves sinuantur in alas;
 magna pedis digitos pars occupat, oraque cornu
 indurata rigent finemque in acumine ponunt.

(*Met.* 14.498–503)

his voice and his throat became narrow, and his hair
 changes into feathers, and his new neck is covered with feathers,
 as are his chest and back, and his arms receive bigger feathers,
 and his elbows are bent into light wings;
 the majority of his foot expands to take over the space between
 his toes, and his mouth,
 hardened by a beak, becomes stiff and tapers to a point.

Vergil (following Lycophron) explains that the transformation of Diomedes' men into birds was linked to Diomedes' own transgression against Venus' "heavenly body" (*caelestia corpora*), but in Ovid's account the story is given a more political edge: we are invited to imagine Diomedes' army as a site of debate, an assembly or, if you will, a senate. From this perspective, daring to speak out against Venus, the ancestral goddess of the Julio-Claudian family and therefore a figure for the principate, becomes a dangerous enterprise. It is just as dangerous for those who voice approval for outspoken criticism of the divine authority, for Diomedes and the more prudent part of his army watch in horror as five comrades (Lycus, Idas, Rhexenor, Nycetus, and Abas) are also transformed into snow-white birds just for their admiration of Acmon (*Met.* 14.504–506).

The complex, if not strained, relationship between the poet and the *princeps* is of course a prominent theme in the work of both Vergil and Ovid, and Aelian's allusion to this episode activates the significance of the theme in the *NA* and also reminds us of Aelian's interest elsewhere in the problem of political outspokenness. Later in the *NA*, Aelian describes the behavior of geese that place a pebble in their beaks to prevent themselves from honking and arousing predatory eagles; this passage becomes explicitly political when Aelian concludes the chapter with a reference to Roman tyranny.⁵ But the theme was not only of interest to Aelian in the *NA*. In the *VH*, he tells the story of a tyrant of Troezen who imposes a mandatory silence on his people because of his own fears about conspiracies and a plot against his life. The people find other ways of communicating by means of

⁵ *NA* 5.29, see [Chapter 9](#).

facial expressions and gestures, but the situation finally drives the people to communicating with tears alone, until at last the tyrant is killed by an angry mob.⁶ Relevant to this theme, too, is the anecdote about Aelian's diatribe against Elagabalus, indicating that when it came to speaking out against the principate Aelian thought a self-imposed silence was often the most prudent option.⁷ The accounts by Vergil and Ovid, which would certainly have been known to Aelian's educated Roman readers, reveal that even the programmatic first chapter on the birds of Diomedes is relevant to the recurring theme of Aelian's fraught relationship to Roman imperial power. Schettino has argued that Aelian was complicit with, if not an active supporter of the political and cultural program of the emperor Caracalla.⁸ My own reading of the *NA*, however, reveals that Aelian's critical stance toward Roman society generally should be understood to extend also to the Severan emperors, Caracalla included. Aelian could not, of course, be outspoken in his criticism of the emperors,⁹ but he could voice criticisms under the subterfuge of sophistic learning, and one way to suggest the dangers of speaking out is by invoking the myth of the birds of Diomedes, whose becoming animal was the direct result of challenging divine authority.

Aelian is not, as I hope has become clear, merely interested in conveying a bit of knowledge about a curious species of Hellenophile bird off the coast of southern Italy. He is also interested in the politics of literature and in expressing the transcendent power of a Hellenic identity within Roman imperial culture. Miraculously, according to Aelian's story, becoming animal does not mean that one must cease to be Greek. The story of the birds of Diomedes highlights an essential quality of Hellenism, that regardless of one's physical appearance, one's central Greek core is unchangeable. One may look like an animal, but "by some divine gift" (θείᾳ τινὶ δωρεᾷ) Hellenism will out. Aelian is consequently concerned not only with the cultural value of Hellenism, but also with the anxieties attendant upon being labeled a barbarian.¹⁰ Though the story of the birds of Diomedes gets to the very heart of Rome's connection with the Greek past, Aelian emphasizes not continuity but rupture. On this island off the Italian coast, Greeks are described as foreigners (ἐὼν δὲ Ἑλλην κατὰρῃ ξένος); we are therefore in the land of Western barbarians, Aelian's covert allusion to Romans. And yet it is with Greek foreigners, not with barbarian Romans, that these animals cultivate bonds of intimacy and civility, transcending

⁶ *VH* 14.22. See Spina 2000.

⁷ Philostr. *VS* 625. See Prandi 2005: 71.

⁸ Schettino 2005: 306–307.

⁹ Cf. Schöner 1873: 14–18.

¹⁰ See also *NA* 11.5 and 16.24.

the boundaries between species to share in the Greek cultural experience of *xenia*.

By the third century, however, Hellenism was no longer just an ethnicity; it had become an integral part of the cultural apparatus of the Roman Empire.¹¹ Whether one was in Italy, Africa, or Asia Minor, being an educated Roman entailed at least a measure of Hellenic learning, and for the cultured elite of the empire, a stylized Hellenic persona was mandatory. And yet, implying that Greek identity was an essential quality, as Aelian does in the story of the birds of Diomedes, cannot help but also, paradoxically, show up the constructed, artificial quality of Hellenism in the Imperial period. Even though Aelian could speak Greek as well as anyone from the Attic heartland, he was not born a “Classical Greek”; he made himself into one.¹² Regardless of whether Aelian was a former slave born to Greek parents or whether he was descended from a Roman family, the fact remains that by the third century CE no one had been born a “Classical Greek” for six hundred years, and Aelian himself is aware of this chronological gulf separating him from the Classical world.¹³

As a native of Italy who wrote in Greek, Aelian was not alone in the literary landscape of the second and third centuries. Two other personalities stand out. The emperor Marcus Aurelius is, of course, the most famous Roman known for his literary expression in Greek. Though he corresponded with his teacher Fronto in Latin,¹⁴ his *Meditations* in Greek have become a central text of Stoic philosophy. Another native of Italy who wrote in Greek was Aspasius of Ravenna, the subject of a biographical notice in Philostratus’ *Lives of the Sophists*.¹⁵ It is almost certain that Aelian knew Aspasius personally, since both were fellow pupils of Pausanias in Rome. Like Aelian, Aspasius strove to express himself with simplicity of style (σὺν ἁφελείᾳ, VS 627), but Aspasius’ career was decidedly more illustrious than Aelian’s: he was appointed Imperial Secretary under Caracalla or Alexander Severus and even held the chair of rhetoric at Rome. Also like Aelian, Aspasius attracted the criticism of Philostratus the Lemnian, who wrote a treatise entitled *How One Should Write Letters* (πῶς χρὴ ἐπιστέλλειν) targeting Aspasius’ activity as Imperial Secretary. These details offer a glimpse of a competitive literary scene in which the practitioners of Greek rhetoric in Italy strove to make a name for themselves while surrounded by men from the East for whom expression in Attic Greek was putatively more “natural.”

¹¹ See *inter alios* Swain 1996, Schmitz 1997, Goldhill 2001, Whitmarsh 2001, and Perkins 2009.

¹² See Whitmarsh 2001: 108.

¹³ *NA* pr., lines 21–24.

¹⁴ For the letters, see Richlin 2006.

¹⁵ See also *Souda* α 4205, Bowie 2009: 25.

So, for as much as Aelian is a Greek, he is also a Roman, as he himself will later admit in the *VH*, one of the *barbaroi* whom the birds of Diomedes will not go near. But the essentialism of Greek identity is a fiction that Aelian feels the need to perpetuate, which raises the specter of anxiety that must have haunted every practitioner of Greek *paideia* during the Imperial period.¹⁶ If one was not born a “Classical Greek,” but rather if that was an identity that one had to perform, then the legitimacy of that performance was always at stake.¹⁷ This anxiety comes to the fore even in Aelian’s Greek literary persona, as his emblematic opening chapter suggests. At the same time that he asserts, “I too am a Greek,” he also quietly asks, “Am I Greek enough?” The birds of Diomedes would be able to tell.

Roman stories in the NA

An important strategy in legitimizing his performance of *paideia* in the *NA* is Aelian’s studied distancing of himself from Roman culture. That is achieved most obviously in part by the avoidance of citing any Latin sources in the *NA* – Roman characters appear within the pages of the *NA*, but Latin writers do not. Nevertheless, Aelian’s Roman sympathies do appear from time to time, reinforcing the idea that his Greek literary persona was necessarily a product of his ongoing negotiation with Roman culture and Roman identity. Consider, for example, the way in which Aelian narrates the famous episode of the Gallic siege of the Capitoline in 386 BCE and the alarm sounded by the geese during the invaders’ nocturnal ascent of the citadel. Aelian speaks of “the Romans” objectively in the third person, nowhere self-identifying as a Roman himself. At the same time, however, he embellishes the story with several superfluous historical and cultural details that betray his intimacy with the material.

The piece starts off as a discussion of the relative merits of dogs and geese: “when it comes to keeping watch, dogs are not as helpful as geese, and the Romans found this out (καὶ τοῦτο κατεφώρασαν Ῥωμαῖοι)” (*NA* 12.33). He goes on to explain the historical evidence for his assertion: “The Celts, you see, were at war with them (αὐτοῖς), and having pressed them (αὐτούς) very strongly they were in the city itself, and indeed Rome had fallen to them except for the Capitoline hill.” It is unlikely that Aelian is following any single source for the narration of this famous episode from Roman

¹⁶ Cf. Aristid. 1.326, and see Säid 2001 and 2006.

¹⁷ Cf. Salih and Butler 2004: 129, on normative heterosexuality as a “panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization.”

history. It was part of Rome's "national folklore"¹⁸ and would therefore have been one of the earliest stories that Aelian learned about Rome's illustrious past, much as an American child might learn of the legendary midnight ride of Paul Revere. But Aelian distances himself as narrator from any connection to the story. The Romans are "they" or "them," never "us" or "our people," and Rome is certainly not "our city." Compare Varro's more overtly patriotic account of the episode from a fragment of his book *On the Life of the Roman People*: "... that our army (*noster exercitus*) was routed in such a way that the Gauls gained possession of Rome except for the Capitolium" (fr. 61 Riposati). No such alignment or identification with Rome is to be found in Aelian's account.

Other narrative gestures, though, betray Aelian's intimate familiarity with this most Roman of stories. Marcus Manlius' role in the events is an important part of the tradition, but he is hardly Aelian's focus. Aelian is, remember, ostensibly interested in dogs and geese. What does it matter then that "this man, you know (τοῖ), also wreathed his son with a crown for his military excellence, but then killed him because he deserted his post"? This mini-narrative about Manlius and his son is superfluous to the historical evidence that geese are better at keeping watch than dogs. And the offhand, almost gossipy way in which Aelian launches into the digression ("this man, you know . . .") is the mark of a storyteller familiar with and tempted to indulge in the expansive network of interrelated stories that make up Rome's legendary past.¹⁹

When the Gauls attack in the middle of the night from the most unlikely approach to the Capitoline, they throw food to the dogs to keep them quiet. But it is a peculiarity of geese, says Aelian, to cackle when food is thrown at them, and so, thanks to the cackling of the geese, Manlius and the other Romans are roused from their slumber and are able to repel the Gauls who are attacking from the steep slopes. Aelian concludes the narrative with a bit of aetiology: "With regards to this, you know (τοῖ), dogs pay the price among the Romans to this day (καὶ νῦν) every year for the memory of their ancient betrayal, but the goose is honored on appointed days, and he appears in public in a litter with great pomp and circumstance." The goose parade must have been quite a sight, and it was clearly a ritual that Aelian himself had witnessed. And yet Aelian stops short of the kind of detailed personal commentary on the spectacle that we might expect from a paradoxographer interested in the cultural significance of animals. A

¹⁸ Horsfall 1981: 311.

¹⁹ Cf. Plin. *Nat.* 10.51, who stays on topic in his succinct account of the same story.

missed opportunity, to say the least. Again, one wonders whether Aelian's reticence to speak further about this peculiar Roman tradition has anything to do with his sensitivity about seeming "too Roman."²⁰

In other chapters, there is a noticeable distancing from Roman political authority as well, a theme merely alluded to by the story of the birds of Diomedes, as I argued above. Augustus himself appears twice in the *NA*, and both times with reference to the asp-inflicted death of Cleopatra. When we first encounter him, he is approaching, a threatening figure on the horizon (τοῦ Σεβαστοῦ προσιόντος), as Cleopatra seeks a means of death that will minimize her suffering (*NA* 9.11). The tone is not one of panic, and Cleopatra is hardly a coward. On the contrary, the setting is sympotic (ἐν τοῖς συμποσίοις) and her inquiry into the ideal means of suicide is conceived in philosophical terms. Aelian even describes Cleopatra's choice in the solemn language of epic: death from the bite of the asp is, "so that I might speak Homerically, gentle (ἄβληχρόν)." The phrase is a studied allusion to Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, where Teiresias in the underworld informs Odysseus that his own death will be gentle (θάνατος . . . ἄβληχρός, 11.134–135) and that it will come peacefully in comfortable old age, when he is surrounded by his blessed people. Homer was for Aelian the master poet and an authority for knowledge in all spheres of human and animal life, and so the allusion to the *Odyssey* here, more than merely ornamental, reinforces the nobility of Cleopatra's death.²¹ Aelian later resumes the narrative in the same book of the *NA*, in a further discourse on the bite of the asp:²²

ἐνθεν τοι καὶ τῆς Κλεοπάτρας ὁ θάνατος τοῖς ἀμφὶ τὸν Σεβαστὸν οὐ πάνυ τι ῥαδίως ἐγνώσθη ἀλλὰ ὀψέ, δύο κεντημάτων καὶ μάλα γε δυσθεάτων καὶ δυσθηράτων ὀφθέντων, δι' ὧν ἐφωράθη τὸ τοῦ θανάτου αἶγιμα. ἄλλως τε καὶ ἵχνη τοῦ τῆς ἀσπίδος σύρματος ἐφάνη, πρόδηλα τοῖς ἔχουσι τῆς τούτων κινήσεως τῶν ζώων τὴν ἱστορίαν ὄντα. (*NA* 9.61)

How Cleopatra died was learned by Augustus' men not at all easily, but after a long time, when two punctures that were very hard to notice and discover were seen; that was how the riddle of her death was discovered. Above all, the traces of the asp's trailing motion were evident, which are evident to those who have the history/inquiry of the movement of these creatures.

The reader's sympathies are once again aligned with the Egyptian queen for the riddling manner of her death, presenting as it does an interpretative

²⁰ Cf. also the bare notice about the Roman victory over Pyrrhos, *NA* 1.37; see Nenci 1955.

²¹ The numerous references to Homer in the *NA* have been catalogued and analyzed by Kindstrand 1976. For the fundamental significance of Homer for Greek *paideia* and literature of the Roman Imperial period, see Kim 2010.

²² Schettino 2005: 290 also sees an intentional connection between *NA* 9.11 and 9.61.

challenge for Augustus' bumbling ministers.²³ And when the manner of Cleopatra's death is finally discovered, it is not because of the intellect of Rome's newest military conqueror. Such sophisticated hermeneutics are, rather, the province of those who write and read animal histories, the keepers of specialized knowledge. Duane Roller notes that Augustus would soon appropriate Hellenistic scholarship in the manipulation of Roman antiquarianism: "The newness of Rome to the Greeks was matched by the self-conception of the Augustan era . . . Thus the Greek scholars became the implementation of the Roman, especially Augustan, view of early Rome and its continuity with the present."²⁴ In the passage quoted above, Aelian shows us the beginnings of the process identified by Roller: if Cleopatra's death was a riddling expression of foreign sophistication and learning, Augustus will rely on his cadre of intellectuals to meet the challenge. The fact remains, however, that the source of such power resides not with the emperor himself, but with the scholars on whom he must rely for the reinforcement of his imperial vision.²⁵

Elsewhere in Aelian's reminiscences of the Roman civil wars, we see a similar alignment of sympathies with the victims rather than with the triumphal victors. In a touching excursus about how dolphins are mindful of their dead, Aelian notes as a vivid negative example that,

καὶ τὸν Ῥωμαῖον Πομπήιον τὸν Μέγαν ἐπὶ κλῆν ἀποκτείναντες Αἰγύπτιοι τοσαῦτα ἐργασάμενον καὶ νίκας νικήσαντα ἄγαν σεμνὰς καὶ θριαμβεύσαντα τρίς καὶ τὸν τοῦ φονέως πατέρα σώσαντα καὶ εἰς τὴν Αἰγυπτίων βασιλείαν ἐπαναγαγόντα εἶασαν ἔρριμμένον, ἄμοιρον τῆς κεφαλῆς, πλησίον τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ ἐκέϊνον, ὥς ὑμᾶς πολλάκις ἑῶσι. (*NA* 12.6, p. 283, lines 18–23)

The Egyptians, when they killed the Roman Pompey, called The Great, who had achieved so much and been victorious in victories worthy of much respect and who triumphed three times and who saved the life of his murderer's father and had restored him to the rule of the Egyptians – they left him prostrate, deprived of his head, beside the sea, even him, as they often leave you [the dolphin].

Pompey receives here exactly the kind of effusive praise that is denied Augustus – and Julius Caesar, it should be noted, receives no notice at all in the pages of the *NA*. Aelian is, as this example makes clear, willing to recognize and honor the achievements of Rome's great men of the past, but such eulogies are exceedingly rare in the *NA*, and it is significant that the rhetorical function of this particular eulogy is not to praise Pompey *per se*,

²³ Cf. D.C., 51.14 and Schettino 2005: 299–300.

²⁴ Roller 2003: 72.

²⁵ Cf. Suet. *Aug.* 89.1.7–9.

but to emphasize the Egyptians' degradation of Pompey's corpse.²⁶ Such are the symptoms of Roman civil war, and the image of the great Roman decapitated recurs again in the *NA*, in reference to the fallen emperor Galba, whose head could not be cut off by his enemies until they had killed the dog who stood guard beside him. Aelian notes that this occurred in "one of the civil wars in Rome" (ἐν τινι τῶν ἐμφύλων πολέμων ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ, 7.10). When Pompey was felled and left unburied by the Egyptians, that could be understood as the unthinking crime of a barbarian people, but in the short narrative about the death of Galba the Romans are revealed to be just as barbarous, if not worse, for here the crime is perpetrated by Romans against a fellow Roman.²⁷

Aelian also seems to have had little regard for the Roman senate. Introducing a chapter on the mating habits of the land tortoise, Aelian indicates that his source is Demostratos, who he claims was a member of the Roman senate (τῶν ἐκ τῆς Ῥωμαίων βουλῆς γενόμενος, *NA* 15.19). Aelian then adds parenthetically, "not at all I suppose for this reason is he a sufficient witness" (οὐ τί που διὰ τοῦτο ἤδη τεκμηριῶσαι ἱκανός), but because of his intellectual achievements in natural science and philosophy and for the eloquence with which he expressed his knowledge.²⁸ Consistent with his self-portrait in the preface and epilogue, where Aelian redefines nobility and virtue as literary achievement, these remarks convey the idea that political achievement generally and membership of the Roman senate specifically are in and of themselves irrelevant. Aelian's sentiment here may be interpreted as a sign of his anger at the fact that the appointment of men from the East to senatorial rank became increasingly indiscriminate during his own lifetime.²⁹ Though his discontent cannot have been motivated by ethnic or racial prejudice against Greeks *per se*, he surely lamented the fact that advancement to the senate was not based on merit, talent, and the

²⁶ Cf. Schettino 2005: 291–292. ²⁷ Cf. Suet. *Gal.* 20.2.1–5; see Raoss 1958.

²⁸ There is a brief biographical notice at *Souda* δ 51, and Pliny lists a Demostratos as one of his foreign sources (*externis*, *Nat.* 1.37). Wellmann 1895: 176 places Aelian's Demostratos no later than the reign of Augustus on the tenuous basis that the Augustan writer Dioscorides alludes to a tradition about the urine of the lynx (*lungourion*, *Dsc.* 2.81 Wellmann), a tradition with which Pliny's Demostratos was also familiar (cf. *Plin. Nat.* 37.34). But Dioscorides does not cite Demostratos by name and it seems reasonable to assume that the story about *lungourion* was a commonplace among writers of natural history. Furthermore, if Aelian is right that Demostratos was a member of the senate, one would not have found a Greek senator in the Rome of Augustus, much less during the Republic. There is epigraphical evidence for three Athenian Demostratoi during the reign of the Julio-Claudians; all were prominent figures and held a number of public offices, but none were senators (Schmalz 2009: 249–251). Aelian's Demostratos must be different than the one mentioned by Pliny. Keydell 1937: 432 n. 2 dates Aelian's Demostratos to the late second century CE and supposes on the basis of *Ael. NA* 15.19 that Aelian knew him personally.

²⁹ Walton 1929: 60; see also Halfmann 1979 and 1982.

promise that one would be a competent administrator. It is remarkable that Demostratos receives Aelian's praise in spite of the fact that he was a Roman senator.

In a short passage elsewhere, Aelian even places an etiology of the Roman *fascēs*, the very symbol of Roman political and imperial power, within a religious discourse that transcends Rome itself. The effect is twofold. The narrative grants a privileged central position to the Palatine hill, where, inspired by the augury of twelve vultures, Romulus once "established the custom for rods equal in number to the birds seen at that time to proceed before Roman rulers" (*NA* 10.22).³⁰ The narrative memorializes the birth of the quintessential paraphernalia of Roman imperial power, for the *fascēs* were a potent visual reminder of Roman authority throughout the world. On the other hand, demonstrating the sacred role of the vulture in religious practices stretching from Spain to Egypt, the narrative also connects Rome to the world by means other than imperial: Romulus' augury is in Aelian's vision but one instance of a pervasive, transcultural religious mentality. Being Roman in this way is not to enact a position of cultural superiority, but to find alternative avenues by which to identify one's relationship with the world at large. Throughout the *NA*, Aelian figures Roman traditions and Roman identity within an emergent imperial culture that absorbs and breaks down the barriers between ethnicities.³¹

But Aelian's view of a universalizing empire demanded the elimination of Rome's more barbaric qualities. The concern lingered that, for all the benefits of empire, Rome would always be culturally inferior and unsophisticated. This anxiety is expressed most clearly, and not without humor, in Aelian's discourse on the peacock, "the most beautiful of birds" (*NA* 5.21). The reference to Rome comes only at the end of the chapter, but the entirety of the passage must be considered in detail. Aware of its own beauty, the peacock "makes its feathers stand up in order and all in a row, and it resembles a flowering meadow or a painting with the varied embellishment of polychromatic paint, and a sweaty job awaits painters to represent what is characteristic of its nature" (τὰ πτερὰ ἐν κόσμῳ καὶ κατὰ στοῖχον ὀρθοῖ, καὶ ἔοικεν ἀνθηρῶ λειμῶνι ἢ γραφῇ πεπτοικιλμένη πολυχροία τῇ τῶν φαρμάκων, καὶ ἰδρῶς πρόκειται ζωγράφοις εἰκάσαι τῆς φύσεως τὸ ἴδιον, p. 111, lines 19–22). The peacock, representing the

³⁰ Cf. Liv. 1.8.1–3.

³¹ Cf. Schettino, who sees a contemporary interest in connecting Rome with Egypt as the very "*humus da cui nasce il de natura animalium*" (2005: 293). On the complex relationship between local knowledge and imperial power in "compilatory" literature of the period, see König & Whitmarsh 2007: 11–12.

height of beauty and sophistication, recalls Aelian's description of the *NA* itself: "a meadow or garland in bloom with polychromatic variety, the many animals acting like flower-bearers" (οἷονεὶ λειμῶνά τινα ἢ στέφανον ὠραῖον ἐκ τῆς πολυχροίας, ὡς ἀνθροφόρων τῶν ζώων τῶν πολλῶν, *ep.*, p. 431, lines 10–11). The bird's plumage surpasses "the garments of the Medes and the embroideries of the Persians" (τὴν τῶν Μήδων ἐσθῆτα καὶ τὰ Περσῶν ποικίλματα, *NA* 5.21, p. 111, lines 24–25). Aelian reports that the bird was brought to the Greek world from barbarian lands, and that it was fetishized as a specimen of exotic beauty: "and indeed in Athens on the first of each month they used to receive both men and women for the examination of the birds, and they used to hold that viewing as a source of revenue" (καὶ Ἀθηνῆσιν γε ταῖς νομηνίαις ἐδέχοντο καὶ ἄνδρας καὶ γυναικας ἐπὶ τὴν ἱστορίαν αὐτῶν, καὶ τὴν θεὰν πρόσσοδον εἶχον, p. 112, lines 2–4). The Athenian examination (ἱστορία) of the peacock represents a Classical exemplum in miniature of what Aelian has attempted to do on a grand literary scale in the *NA*. We may think of the display of the peacock in Athens as the beginning of its assimilation to the world of culture, learning, and sophistication. In Athens the peacock becomes more than just an exotic bird; it becomes a powerful symbol of nature's art.

The conclusion of the passage is pregnant with meaning: "The Roman Hortensius is judged to be the first to have sacrificed a peacock for a banquet. But Alexander the Macedonian was astounded when he saw these birds in India, and in awe of their beauty he threatened with the most severe threats anyone who sacrificed a peacock" (Ὁρτῆνσιος δὲ ὁ Ῥωμαῖος καταθύσας ἐπὶ δείπνῳ τῶν πρώτος ἐκρίθη. Ἀλέξανδρος δὲ ὁ Μακεδὼν ἐν Ἰνδοῖς ἰδὼν τοῦσδε τοὺς ὄρνιθας ἐξεπλάγη, καὶ τοῦ κάλλους θαυμάσας ἠπειλήσεν τῷ καταθύσαντι τῶν ἀπειλὰς βαρυτάτας, *NA* 5.21, p. 112, lines 7–11). Hortensius' name was a byword in Rome for abandoned, insatiate living,³² and here he represents Rome generally. The whole of the passage appeals to cultural types: Medes and Persians are known for their finery, Athenians for their inquisitiveness, India for its natural beauty. Within this scheme, Aelian pessimistically figures Rome as morally bankrupt and brutish beneath its pretensions to refinement. For the Roman, the peacock is not something to be appreciated for the pleasure it offers the eye or the intellect, but something to satisfy a gourmand's hungry stomach. Finally, in citing Alexander's disapproval of sacrificing peacocks, we may see Aelian questioning the degree to which Rome will ever participate in the ideal vision of a humanistic, international Hellenism.

³² Cf. *NA* 3.42.

An animal spectacle

Discussion of the impact of Roman culture on Aelian's *NA* leads inevitably to Rome's ongoing fascination with the arena and its popular animal entertainments. In his account of the reign of Commodus, the historian Herodian indicates that part of the spectacle was not just the violence between animals and emperor during the staged *venatio*, or "hunt," but the very novelty of the species introduced to the gaze of the Roman public. Elevated upon a terrace specially constructed in the arena ("He provided a display of marksmanship rather than of courage"), the emperor himself slew deer, gazelles, a variety of horned animals (except bulls), lions, and leopards:

τὰ δὲ πανταχόθεν ζῷα ἡθροίζετο αὐτῷ. τότε γοῦν εἶδομεν ὅσα ἐν γραφαῖς ἐθαυμάζομεν· ἀπὸ τε γὰρ Ἰνδῶν καὶ Αἰθιοπῶν, εἴ τι πρότερον ἄγνωστον ἦν, μεσημβρίας τε καὶ τῆς ἀρκτῶς γῆς ζῷα πάντα φονεύων Ῥωμαίοις ἔδειξε. (Hdn. 1.15.4–5)

Creatures from all over were collected for him. It was then that we saw things that we used to wonder at in paintings. For from the Indians and the Ethiopians, if there was anything that was previously unknown, all the creatures of the earth, from the south and the north, he displayed to the Romans while slaying them.

Herodian's description captures the most prominent themes operating in Aelian's zoography. First, the scene illustrates empire's ability to satisfy exotic fantasies – the fantasies not just of a megalomaniacal emperor, but of the adoring crowds as well.³³ Concomitant with the fulfillment of such imperial fantasies, however, is the uncertain ontological status of the new reality. As they gaze upon Commodus' paradoxical domestication of the safari, the Roman people are given the opportunity to see for themselves sights that they had previously seen only in paintings (ἐν γραφαῖς). Experiencing an awesome reality heretofore mediated by art, Herodian emphasizes his self-conscious awareness of just how contrived this new reality is. Suddenly (τότε γοῦν), life itself is like a painting.

Second, the scene is one of Herodian's many commentaries on the tyrannical violence perpetrated by the parade of vicious emperors after Marcus Aurelius. The image of Commodus hurling his javelins at the animals confined in the arena below him is the real-life posture memorialized by the emperor himself in the statue that he erected opposite the senate house. Senators exiting their council chambers would be confronted

³³ See Auguet 1994: 112–113, Wiedemann 1992: 62–67, Coleman 2006: lxxii, Gilhus 2006: 34–35.

with a colossal image of Commodus the hunter, “ready to shoot with his bow, for indeed he wished even images of him to inspire fear” (τόξον διηγκυλημένον· ἐβούλετο γὰρ δὴ καὶ τὰς εἰκόνας αὐτῷ φόβον ἀπειλεῖν, Hdn. 1.14.9). Herodian’s juxtaposition of the description of the statue with the scene of Commodus’ staged hunt in the arena suggests a symbolic association. Members of the senatorial class sitting in the arena would perhaps sympathize with Commodus’ powerless animal victims. After Commodus’ death in 192, his threatening statue opposite the senate house was replaced with a statue of Freedom (Ἐλευθερίας εἰκόνα, 1.15.1).

It has already been established that Aelian, who came of age during the reign of Commodus, possessed a keen interest in art and nature and in the pathological violence of his world. But I draw attention to Herodian’s account of Commodus’ animal spectacles to illustrate how the arena, both as a physical space and in the imagination, was an important locus where Roman cultural identity was continually forged and redefined.³⁴ It was a space where specimens of imperial exotica could be contained and absorbed, made Roman, and domesticated before the gaze of the public. And it was also a place of contact between various strata of society, where emperor, senate, masses, and resident and visiting foreigners came together. As such, in the arena, politics and society were themselves on display, and animals – both the real and the metaphorical – were, as objects of display in the arena, integral elements in the vocabulary of cultural and social discourse.

Aelian’s *NA* represents therefore a transformation of the arena. In Aelian’s conceptualization, animals are still objects for display, but not for the gruesome spectacle of their destruction. Blood is exchanged for scholarly learning; the violence and death of the *venatio* are traded for an appreciation of our common humanity with animals and, not least of all, an appreciation of the sophistic learning of the author. Aelian’s position opposes that of, for example, Martial’s *Liber spectaculorum*, which, fusing a celebration of the spectacles in the amphitheatre with imperial panegyric, consolidated the status quo of Roman popular culture with Roman imperial power.³⁵ Two narratives in the *NA* that directly treat Roman fascination with animal spectacles reinforce the notion of Aelian’s figurative transformation of the Roman arena. One is Aelian’s version of the story of Androkles and the lion (*NA* 7.48), which I discuss in [Chapter 9](#), in a more detailed treatment of Aelian’s relationship with the figure of the emperor. The other animal spectacle, however, is that of the trained elephants that performed during

³⁴ See Gunderson 1996.

³⁵ See Coleman 2006: lxxix–lxxxi.

the shows produced by Germanicus Caesar, the nephew and adopted son of Tiberius (*NA* 2.11). On the surface it is a charming anecdote, but in fact it addresses in compelling terms the complexity of the relationship between Aelian's Greek and Roman identities.

Pliny the Elder informs us that, "in Germanicus Caesar's gladiatorial show [elephants] produced even some artless movements in the manner of dancers" (*Germanici Caesaris munere gladiatorio quosdam etiam inconditos meatus edidere saltantium modo*, Plin. *Nat.* 8.4).³⁶ Aelian's account of the same performance is markedly different. What Pliny essentially tossed aside as unremarkable and worth only one sentence, Aelian expands into an elaborate narrative that spans several pages. Pliny disparaged the elephants' movements as artless (*inconditos*), but Aelian speaks instead "about their sense of beauty and art (εὐμουσίας), their ready obedience (εὐπαθείας), and the facility (εὐκολίας) with which they learn things that are difficult even for a human to learn" (*NA* 2.11, p. 33, lines 1–3). Moreover, "when the elephant has learned these things, it knows them, and it is both precise (ἀκριβοῖ) and does not make a mistake (οὐ σφάλλεται)" (7–8). Aelian claims a lot for these performing elephants, and he is aware that his narrative approaches the unbelievable:

εἰ μὲν οὖν ἔμελλον τὴν ἐν Ἰνδοῖς αὐτῶν εὐπείθειαν καὶ εὐμάθειαν ἢ τὴν ἐν Αἰθιοπία ἢ τὴν ἐν Λιβύῃ γράφειν, ἴσως ἂν τῷ καὶ μῦθον ἐδόκουν τινὰ συμπλάσας κομπάζειν, εἴτα ἐπὶ φήμῃ τοῦ θηρίου τῆς φύσεως καταπαύεσθαι· ὅπερ ἔχρῃ δρᾶν φιλοσοφοῦντα ἄνδρα ἥκιστα καὶ ἀληθείας ἐραστὴν διάπυρον. ὃ δὲ αὐτὸς εἶδον καὶ ὅτινα πρότερον ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ πραχθέντα ἀνέγραψαν ἄλλοι προειλόμην εἰπεῖν . . . (*NA* 2.11, p. 33, lines 9–16)

If I were going to write about the ready obedience and learning [of elephants] in India, Ethiopia, or Libya, I would perhaps seem to someone to have fabricated a story and to be boasting, and accordingly to be speaking falsely of the beast's nature to benefit its reputation. But that is something that a man doing philosophy should do least of all, as well as a red-hot lover of truth. But what I myself have seen and the past events at Rome that others have described – these I have chosen to tell . . .

Aelian here demonstrates a concern for the status of his authorial persona. Apparently, readerly expectations dictate that animal *fictions* be set in geographies that are appropriately distant in the mind: the imagination runs rampant on the margins of the civilized world. Aelian claims, consequently, that his choice to provide an account of things that happened in Rome and even of what he himself has seen is motivated by the desire not

³⁶ Were the elephants to be killed? The evidence of Cic. *Fam.* 7.1.3 demonstrates that violence perpetrated against elephants in the arena could elicit not the delight, but the horror and sympathy of the public. See Coleman 1990: 58.

to appear to be indulging in narrative fantasies. The Roman setting lends the story a greater ontological privilege: if these things happened in Rome (the thinking goes), then they must be true.

At this point, Aelian begins the narrative proper:

πρῶτος θεᾶς ἐπετέλει Ῥωμαίοις ὁ Γερμανικὸς ὁ Καῖσαρ· εἶη δ' ἂν ἀδελφιδοῦς Τιβερίου οὗτος. οὐκοῦν ἐγένοντο μὲν καὶ ἄρρενες ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ τέλειοι πλείους καὶ θήλειαι, εἴτα ἐξ αὐτῶν ἐτέχθησαν αὐθιγενεῖς. καὶ ὅτε τὰ κῶλα ὑπῆρξαντο πῆγνυσθαι, σοφὸς ἀνὴρ ὁμιλεῖν τοιοῦτοις θηρίοις ἐπώλευσεν αὐτούς, δαιμονία τινὶ καὶ ἐκπληκτικῇ διδασκαλίᾳ μεταχειρισάμενος. (*NA* 2.11, p. 33, lines 19–24)

Germanicus Caesar was the first fully to stage shows for the Romans. This would be Tiberius' nephew. There were, then, in Rome some full-grown male and female elephants; then from them were produced native-born elephants. And when their limbs began to grow firm, a man wise in terms of his association with such beasts broke them in, handling them with a divinely inspired and astounding training.

The detail that the elephants were born in Rome on one level accounts for the fact that they were able to learn the dance from a very young age. On another level, though, it matters that these sophisticated elephants were not imported, that they were native-born *Roman* elephants (αὐθιγενεῖς). Earlier, the Roman setting was meant to lend credibility to the story; now, the Roman birth of the elephants implicitly explains their superior aptitude. Later in the same narrative, Aelian declares that the elephants' innate talents are the “gifts of nature” (φύσεως δῶρα, p. 35, line 6), but he also makes it abundantly clear that the elephants are in need of a “wise man” (σοφὸς ἀνὴρ, p. 33, line 23) to train them. This must be an intradiegetic figure for Aelian himself, who referred to himself indirectly only a few lines before as a φιλοσοφῶν ἀνὴρ. If, then, their Roman birth did lend them any superlative talents, if there is some “singularly striking characteristic” (ιδιότης καθ' ἑκάστον ἐκπληκτικὴ, p. 35, lines 6–7) about being born on Roman soil, then it is, paradoxically, merely something raw and uncivilized, something that needs to be “broken in” by one competent to lend grace and civilization. The narrative thus simultaneously problematizes both Rome's privileged position vis-à-vis truth and the notion of a privileged Roman nature.

After elaborating for several pages on the elephants' elegant movements in the dance as well as their refinement at table during a public banquet, Aelian corroborates the narrative with a personal anecdote:

ἐγὼ δὲ εἶδον καὶ γράμματα γράφοντας ἐπὶ πίνακος Ῥωμαῖα ἀστραβῶς τῇ προβοσκίδι καὶ ἀτρέπτως· πλὴν ἐπέκειτο χεῖρ τοῦ διδάξαντος ἐς τὴν τῶν

γραμμάτων παιδαγωγούσα περιγραφὴν, ἔστε ἀπογράψαι τὸ ζῶον· τὸ δὲ ἀτενὲς ἑώρα κάτω. πεπαιδευμένους εἶναι τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῷ ζῳῷ καὶ γραμματικούς εἶπες ἄν. (*NA* 2.11, p. 35, line 27–p. 36, line 4)

And I myself saw [elephants] even writing Roman letters upon a tablet in a straight line with their trunk and without hesitation. The only thing was that the hand of the one who taught it was resting upon it, guiding it, as a teacher would instruct a student, to the shape of the letters, until the creature had made its copy. And it was looking straight down. The creature's eyes had been educated to know its letters too, you might say.

The passage deftly illustrates the narrator's sophisticated irony. Superficially the anecdote is meant to motivate the reader's wonder at the sagacity of the elephant, but the narrator's pessimism is unavoidable. Aelian at first presents us with the miraculous image of an elephant that can write Latin, only in the very next clause (πλήν) to reveal the artificiality of the spectacle. Aelian's language also conveys the shallowness of the scene: the noun περιγραφὴ denotes an outline or surface appearance and in legal contexts is a word for fraud,³⁷ while the verb ἀπογράψαι denotes mere copying.³⁸ The final sentence of the entire narrative reinforces the duplicity: it begins with a positive assertion in indirect discourse ("The creature's eyes had been educated to know its letters too"), but that assertion is quickly undermined by the unreality of the verbal phrase ("you might say," εἶπες ἄν). Aelian shows us the hand of the trainer at work; the writing elephant is not a wonder at all.

It is curious, too, that Aelian claims the elephant wrote Roman letters. Comparison with a passage from Pliny is enlightening. Pliny reports that his contemporary Gaius Licinius Mucianus, "who was three times consul, is the authority that one of them [i.e., an elephant] also learned the shapes of Greek letters and was accustomed to write out in the words of that language: 'I myself wrote these things and dedicated Celtic spoils'" (*Mucianus III consul auctor est aliquem ex iis et litterarum ductus Graecarum didicisse solitumque perscribere eius linguae verbis: "Ipse ego haec scripsi et spolia Celtica dicavi,"* Plin. *Nat.* 8.6.4–8).³⁹ Aelian may have borrowed the story of the writing elephant from Pliny, or perhaps directly from Mucianus' own text. The proximity of the accounts of the dancing elephants and the writing elephant in Pliny's text (*Nat.* 8.4 and 8.6, respectively) suggests a Plinian borrowing: in Aelian's text, the story of the writing elephant

³⁷ LSJ περιγραφὴ I.1 and V. ³⁸ LSJ ἀπογράφω I.

³⁹ On the character of Mucianus, his prominence in Flavian politics, and his literary output, see Tac. *Hist.* 1.10, 2.5, Rogers 1980: 86–89, Williamson 2005, and Ash 2007.

caps off the elaborate narrative of the elephants that performed at the games of Germanicus, the same elephants referred to by Pliny at *Nat.* 8.4. Also, Aelian's word for the "shape" of the letters written by the elephant (περιγραφή) seems to be a translation of Pliny's *ductus*;⁴⁰ furthermore, the relation of *ductus* to the verb *ducere* is evoked by Aelian's participle παιδαγωγούσα, describing the guiding hand of the elephant trainer. If, therefore, Aelian borrowed the story of the writing elephant from Pliny, it is interesting that he would make himself the sole authority of the anecdote (ἐγὼ δὲ εἶδον) and also that he would alter the language in which the spurious elephant wrote from Greek to Latin. In so doing, Aelian implicates himself in a sophisticated game of literary translation and cultural transference: the Greek letters written by the elephant in Pliny's Latin prose contrast with the Roman letters written by the elephant in Aelian's Greek prose. The reader identifying the Plinian hypotext in Aelian's anecdote experiences a momentary disorientation from the multiple linguistic shifts.

Beneath the ludic quality of this passage, however, it is possible to read a more serious and potentially liberating commentary on cultural identity. I indicated earlier in this chapter that in the programmatic narrative about the birds of Diomedes (*NA* 1.1) Aelian was suggesting the cultural and intellectual anxiety that arises from reflecting upon the acquired character of a classicizing Hellenic identity, whether his own or that of any contemporary intellectual – male, female, slave, freedman, senator, Greek, Roman, Syrian, Egyptian, or otherwise. Here, in a simultaneously converse and parallel gesture, Aelian represents the spectacle of an elephant mimicking the most refined of *Roman* cultural activities: writing Latin. Putting the pen in the trunk of an elephant, even if that trunk is guided by the hand of a learned trainer, Aelian metonymically displaces the production of Roman letters (γράμματα Ῥωμαῖα) from their accustomed agent; consequently the very notion of Romanness is called into question. Though I would not go so far as to claim for Aelian an anachronistically "postcolonial" attitude, the remarks of Homi Bhabha may here apply: "no culture is full unto itself . . . not only because there are other cultures which contradict its authority, but also because its own symbol-forming activity, its own interpellation in the process of representation, language, signification and meaning-making, always underscores the *claim* to an originary, holistic, organic identity."⁴¹ Aelian's writing elephant likewise threatens the

⁴⁰ Cf. *OLD ductus* 4.

⁴¹ Rutherford 1990: 210. My emphasis.

claim that Roman identity is “originary, holistic, organic.” Furthermore, following Walter Benjamin, Bhabha emphasizes the symbolic significance of translation, “not in a strict linguistic sense of translation, as in ‘a book translated from French into English,’ but as a motif or trope . . . for the activity of displacement within the linguistic sign.”⁴² There is just such a symbolic displacement in the double translation involved in Aelian’s Greek representation of an elephant that can write Roman letters. Aelian’s writing elephant triggers the awareness in the viewer (ἐγὼ δὲ εἶδον) that, despite its seeming essentialism, *Romanitas* too might be something taught. Roman-ness, like Hellenism, is culturally constructed. For Aelian, identity is not fixed at all, but is an ever-changing, shifting, and overlapping palimpsest of personae.

Marriage and the Roman family

The ideological centrality of marriage within Roman imperial culture begins with Augustus. Marriage and the family are and have been perceived in many cultures to be essential building blocks of society,⁴³ but the ideology of marriage and family intensified with the rise of the Roman principate. This fact is confirmed not only by Augustus’ social legislation of 18–17 BCE, the *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* and the *lex Iulia de adulteriis*, but also by numerous works of art and literature, “from the friezes of the Ara pacis to Horace’s *Carmen saeculare*,” which sought “to link the success of the new regime with the traditional family structure.”⁴⁴ The attempts of Septimius Severus and Julia Domna to legitimize their rule by projecting the image of a harmonious family unit that extended the stability of the Antonines are compelling evidence for the continuity of the Augustan emphasis on marriage and family into the third century.⁴⁵ Cassius Dio, Aelian’s contemporary, in his *Roman History* even has Augustus ask, “How is it not the best thing when a wife is chaste, domestic, a house-keeper, and a rearer of children?” (πῶς μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ἄριστον γυνὴ σῶφρων οἰκουρὸς οἰκονόμος παιδοτρόφος; D.C. 56.3.3), a sentiment echoed in the imperial propaganda of the Severans, on public monuments like the Arch of the *Argentarii* in Rome (Fig. 1) or the famous family portrait on the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Hersch 2010: 11–14. On marriage and Roman law from the Late Republic into the Imperial period, see Treggiari 1991. On marriage and family in Greco-Roman philosophical thought, see Gaca 2003: 85.

⁴⁴ Milnor 2005: 12. Cf. Suet. *Aug.* 89.2 and *Gel.* 1.6.2. ⁴⁵ Levick 2007: 43–44.



Fig. 1 Septimius Severus, Julia Domna, and Geta (chiseled out) performing a sacrifice, Arch of the *Argentarii* (204 CE), Rome.

Berlin tondo. This ideology, reinforcing marriage and family as the atomic building blocks of imperial culture, pervaded Roman life.⁴⁶

Elite culture had, however, developed a zone of exception to this ideology. Drawing on the philosophical ideals of *ataraxia* and *apatheia* (“impassivity”), both Roman Epicureanism and Stoicism valorized the figure of the individual who sought complete peace and calm and did so in part by avoiding the unnecessary troubles of life, including the personal disturbances and distractions that came with marriage and the rearing of children. According to this tradition, which is given serious consideration by Epictetus and Seneca, the wise man who remained unmarried was a role model.⁴⁷ It was acknowledged as a difficult path that set oneself outside of conventional human life. Interestingly, one who chose to separate himself from conventional human relations in this way Epictetus characterizes as inhuman: the *skholastikos* was an “animal that everyone mocks” (1.11.39 Schenkl). To become animal in this way was nevertheless perceived as a valid life choice in Imperial Roman culture, as evidenced by the fact that

⁴⁶ Veyne 1978 and Foucault 1986: 147–185.

⁴⁷ Epict. 1.11.1–40, 3.22.70–73, 77; Sen. *De matrimonio* 186 Bickel. See Gaca 2003: 87.

young men were encouraged in the rhetorical exercises of their training to develop and articulate sophisticated responses to the question “Should one get married?” (*gamêteon*).⁴⁸

Philostratus’ remarks about Aelian’s status as a committed bachelor must be read with this historical background in mind. It will be remembered from [Chapter 1](#) that at the conclusion of his biography Philostratus says that Aelian died without heirs, “because he excused himself from the procreation of children by never marrying, but this is not the time to philosophize over whether this is a blessing or a burden” (παιδοποιίαν γὰρ παρητήσατο τῷ μὴ γῆμαί ποτε. τοῦτο δὲ εἶτε εὐδαιμον εἶτε ἄθλιον οὐ τοῦ παρόντος καιροῦ φιλοσοφῆσαι, *VS* 625). Philostratus clearly connects Aelian’s choice not to marry with the philosophical and rhetorical tradition outlined above, and although Philostratus is exploiting the ambiguity inherent in that choice to impugn Aelian’s masculinity, the humor (for Philostratus) is precisely that, whatever the *real* basis for Aelian’s decision not to marry, Aelian’s potentially dubious choice could be legitimized by the assertion (pretext?) that it was philosophically motivated. In the absence of any explicit autobiographical statement on Aelian’s part about his philosophically stylized bachelorhood, one may turn to his animal narratives, and indeed several stories in the *NA* give a dynamic picture of Aelian’s pessimistic thoughts on the debased state of marriage and family in Roman culture.

The first of these stories comes after a touching description of familial devotion among elephants in the wild. Then, as a contrast to the *pietas* of elephants, Aelian writes,

ἐγὼ δὲ ᾗδειν μαιράκιον ὦν ἄνθρωπον πρεσβῦτιν Λαϊνίλλαν ὄνομα, καὶ ἐδείκνυτο ὑπὸ πάντων, καὶ ἐπ’ αὐτῇ μῦθος ἐλέγετο, καὶ ὁ γε μῦθος τοιόσδε ἦν. οἱ πρεσβύτεροι πρὸς με ἔφασκον ἐκείνην τὴν ἄνθρωπον ἐρασθεῖσαν οἰκέτου δριμέως αὐτῷ μὲν συγκαθεύδειν, κηλῖδα δὲ ἄρα παισὶ τοῖς ἑαυτῆς περιάπτειν. οἱ δὲ εὐγενεῖς ἦσαν, καὶ εἰς τὴν βουλὴν τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἐτέλουν ἐκ πατέρων τε καὶ τῶν ἄνω τοῦ γένους ἀρξάμενοι. οἱ τοίνυν αἰδούμενοι τῇ μητρὶ ἤχθοντο τοιαῦτα δρώσῃ, καὶ πράως ὑπενουθέτουν, καὶ τοῦ πραττομένου τὴν αἰσχύνην ἐπέλεγον ἡσυχῇ· ἡ δὲ κυμαίνουσα ἐκ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας, καὶ τὸν ἔρωτα ἐπίπροσθεν τῶν υἱέων ποιησαμένη, καταγορεύει αὐτῶν πρὸς τὸν ἄρχοντα, ὃς ἦν τότε, καὶ λέγει ὡς ἐπιβουλεύοιεν αὐτῷ. ὁ δὲ ἔχων εἰς διαβολὰς τὸ οὐς ῥάδιον, καὶ ὑπόπτῃς ὦν καὶ δειλὸς (πάθη δὲ ταῦτα ἀγεννοῦς διανοίας) ἐπίστευσε. καὶ οἱ μὲν οὐδὲν ἀδικοῦντες ἀπέθνησκον, ἡ δὲ ἄθλον τοῦ κατειπεῖν ἠνέγκατο δούλῳ συγκαθεύδειν ἀνέδην. ὦ πατρῷοι

⁴⁸ Cf. D.H. *Rh.* 2.2.1–3 Usener and Radermacher; Theon *Prog.* 121.9–19, 128.3–21 Patillon; [Ps.] Hermog. *Prog.* 11.7–9 Patillon; Lib. *Prog.* 13 Foerster; Aphth. 13.4–18 Patillon; Nicol. *Prog.* 74–75 Felten.

θεοὶ καὶ Ἄρτεμι λοχεΐα Εἰλείθυιαι τε θυγατέρες Ἥρας, τί οὖν ἄν ἔτι Μήδειαν εἵπομεν τὴν Κόλχιν ἢ Πρόκνην τὴν Ἀτθίδα, τῶν ἐναγχὸς τε καὶ καθ' ἡμᾶς παθῶν μνημονεύσαντες; (NA 7.15)

But I myself, when I was a teenager, knew an old woman named Laenilla, and she used to be pointed out by everybody, and a story used to be told about her, and the story goes like this: my elders used to tell me that that woman, having conceived an acute passion for her slave, slept with him and put a mark of shame upon her sons. But they were noble, and belonged to the Roman senate going back to their fathers and ancestors. These, then, being ashamed were angry that their mother had done such things, and they admonished her gently, and calmly they brought up the shame of what was being done. But she, seething with desire and placing lust before her own sons, accuses them to the magistrate in charge at that time and says that they were plotting against him. And he, having a ready ear for slander, and being suspicious and fearful (these are the emotions of an ignoble disposition) believed her. They, then, who had done no wrong, perished, while she took home the prize for her denunciation: she got to sleep with her slave scot-free. Oh gods of our fathers and Artemis of Childbirth and Eileithuias, daughters of Hera, why thus would we still mention Medea of Kolchis or Attic Prokne, when we call to mind things that have happened recently and in our own time?

A mother's private sexual desire, incapable of being tamed and controlled either by legitimate marriage to her senator-husband or by appeals to familial *pietas*, becomes a transgressive force, polluting the household and even corrupting political life in Rome. Laenilla's *erôs*, improperly and obsessively directed at a mere slave, but more powerful than her motherly love for her own children, compels her to exploit the fear and paranoia of a weak Roman magistrate, who wrongfully convicts and executes young men of senatorial rank. Laenilla's wickedness surpasses even that of mythical exemplars, a forceful indication of Aelian's pessimism about the moral failure of marriage and family in Rome.

The failure of Roman marriage is also the theme of Aelian's account of the tame eel once owned by Crassus.⁴⁹ The eel used to recognize the voice of its famous owner when it was summoned and even used to eat from his hand. So thorough was Crassus' domestication of the animal that he adorned it with earrings and necklaces set with precious stones, as if it were a beautiful maiden (οἷα δῆπου ὠραία κόρη, NA 8.4). When the eel died, Crassus mourned and even provided a burial, prompting his companion Domitius to remark, "You fool, you're weeping for a dead eel!"

⁴⁹ Plu. *Util. inimic.* 89a, *Praec. de reip. gub.* 811a, *Sollert. animal.* 976a; Macr. 3.15.4; and Porph. *Abst.* 3.5. In Plin. *Nat.* 9.172, the eel's owner is Hortensius, not Crassus.

The anecdote concludes with Crassus' witty rejoinder: "I am weeping for an animal, but you didn't weep when you buried your three wives" (ἐγὼ θηρίον . . . σὺ δὲ τρεῖς γυναῖκας θάψας οὐκ ἔκλαυσας). Despite the fact that he had treated the eel as a human girl when it was alive, anthropomorphizing his pet with expensive jewelry, in this sentence Crassus concedes to his own becoming animal, eloquently expressed in the juxtaposition of subject and object (ἐγὼ θηρίον). Ironically, though, Crassus contrasts his own animality with the inhumanity of Domitius, whose own wives were so insignificant to him that he did not even mourn them when they died.

When considered alongside Aelian's other stories of Roman marriages, the anecdote becomes more than just a humorous trifle. The protagonists in the story are not anonymous individuals, but prominent Roman figures: Lucius Licinius Crassus and Cnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus were co-censors in 92 BCE and numerous authors attest to their contentious relationship.⁵⁰ Aelian's inclusion of this story within his collection is a further indication of the problematization of the ideology of marriage within the highest levels of Roman political life.

In a later chapter, Aelian tells of an elephant that, upon catching his master's wife and another man in bed together, gored both adulterers with his tusks, leaving their corpses in the polluted bed so that his master could see their crime and know who his avenger was. "And this," says Aelian, "happened in India, but from there it made the journey here (δεῦρο)" (NA 11.15). He seems to imply that the *report* of the adultery and of the Indian elephant's punishment made it to Rome, but in the very next clause it becomes clear that *the events themselves* recurred in Rome:

ἀκούω δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ Τίτου Ῥωμαίων βασιλεύοντος, ἀνδρὸς καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ, καὶ ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ ταῦτόν γεγονέναι· προστιθέασι δὲ ὅτι ἄρα ὁ ἐνθάδε ἐλέφας ἀπέκτεινε μὲν ἀμφοτέρους, καὶ ἐν ἱματίῳ κατεκάλυψε, καὶ ἐλθόντι τῷ τροφεῖ ἀποβαλὼν τὸ ἱμάτιον κειμένους ἀλλήλων πλησίον ἀπέδειξε, καὶ τὸ κέρας δέ, ὥς περ οὖν διέπειρεν αὐτούς, καὶ τοῦτο ἡμαχμένον ἔωρᾶτο. (NA 11.15, p. 267, lines 4–10)

And I hear also when Titus was emperor of the Romans, a fine and noble gentleman, that the same events also happened in Rome. And they add that indeed the elephant here killed them both, and with a cloak he concealed them. And when his keeper returned the elephant, casting off the cloak, revealed them to him as they lay side by side. And the tusk with which he had pierced them, this too was seen covered with blood.

⁵⁰ Cic. *Brut.* 164–165; *de Orat.* 2.45, 227, 230; V. Max. 9.1.4; Plin. *Nat.* 17.1–7; Suet. *Nero* 2.2. See Ward 1974: 186.

Once again Aelian conceals his sources, but it is worth mentioning that the third-person plural verb προστιθέασι (“they add”) suggests multiple sources for this remarkable story. Regardless of whether or not the story is true, Aelian implies that he is not the one making this up. But unlike in the story of the Capitoline geese, where he adopted the voice of an objective historian, Aelian is eager to associate himself explicitly with this Roman story: his reference to Titus as that “fine and noble gentleman” (ἀνδρὸς καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ) is a patriotic evaluation of the emperor according to the standards of Hellenic culture, and the adverbs δεῦρο (“hither”) and ἐνθάδε (“here”) unambiguously situate the narrative voice within the same geographical and cultural space in which the events of the story unfold. Aelian plays a similar game of make-believe in the story of the elephant spectacle in Rome (*NA* 2.11), discussed above.

There is, as it were, satisfaction on the part of the narrator that the elephant’s noble sense of right and wrong transcends geography. India is often in the *NA* the site not only for zoological extremes but also for an idealized vision of the animal world.⁵¹ In this story, consequently, Aelian is excited to be able to represent his own city as sharing in that idealized vision. Rome and the rest of the “civilized” world may teem with amoral activities and behaviors at which Aelian time and again conveys his outrage. That outrage boils to the surface when Aelian depicts the scene of adultery: the bed upon which the lovers trampled and the sheets that they defiled (τῶν στρωμάτων τῶν ὑβρισμένων καὶ τῆς εὐνῆς τῆς πεπατημένης, *NA* 11.15, p. 267, lines 1–2). Aelian’s moral commentary is sophisticated, for the phrase τῆς εὐνῆς τῆς πεπατημένης, recalling Cassandra’s vatic language from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (εὐνᾶς ἀδελφοῦ τῷ πατοῦντι, 1193), assimilates the anonymous lovers of his story with the archetypal adulterers Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. But there is hope. Blind and impotent as we may be, Aelian seems to say, there are at least living among us creatures able to set things right, and to do so in spectacular fashion. Not only does the Roman elephant serve as the righteous agent of his master, but he also has a flair for the dramatic, transforming his triumph into a theatrical event, and writing himself into the role of heroic avenger in this domestic tragedy.

From the image of the Roman elephant’s bloody tusk, Aelian shifts abruptly in the following chapter to the next item in his zoological collection: “The mantic art also is a particular characteristic of snakes” (*NA* 11.16). The setting for this story is Lavinium, a Latin town with a very ancient connection to Rome:

⁵¹ Parker 2008: 79.

κέκληται δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς Λατίνου θυγατρὸς Λαουινίας, ἥνικα Λατίνος Αἰνεΐα συνεμάχησε κατὰ τῶν καλουμένων Ῥουτουλῶν, εἴτα ἐνίκησεν αὐτούς· ὥκισε δὲ Αἰνεΐας ὁ Ἀγχίσου ὁ Τρώς τὴν πόλιν τὴν προειρημένην, εἶη δ' ἂν τῆς Ῥώμης μητρομήτωρ, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις· ἐντεῦθεν γὰρ ὄρμηθεις Ἀσκάnios ὁ Αἰνεΐου καὶ Κρεοῦσης τῆς Τρωάδος ὥκισε τὴν Ἄλβαν, Ἄλβανων δὲ ἡ Ῥώμη ἄποικος. (NA II.16, p. 267, lines 13–18)

It takes its name from Lavinia, the daughter of Latinus, from the time when Latinus made war with Aeneas against those called Rutulians and then conquered them. And Aeneas the Trojan, son of Anchises, colonized the aforementioned city, and it would be Rome's grandmother, you might say, for when he set out from Lavinium, Ascanius, the son of Aeneas and the Trojan woman Creusa, colonized Alba, and Rome was Alba's colony.

These legendary, quasi-historical details would be familiar to any Roman youngster with some knowledge of Vergil or Livy, and possibly also to the educated elite of the Empire who were from non-Italian cultural backgrounds. But regardless of how well known this information may have been, Aelian feels this historical digression is pertinent enough to the story at hand to deserve summary. He wants his readers to be acutely aware that what he is about to relate concerning the oracular power of the snake is connected to Rome's very ancient past, to a time that pre-dates Rome herself but when the lives of Italy's inhabitants were already bound up with the peoples and politics of the wider Mediterranean world⁵² – note that Aelian twice indicates the Trojan background of Aeneas' people, once referring to Aeneas himself and once referring to his first wife, Creusa, who failed to make it out of Troy alive.

We run into difficulty, though, when Aelian then describes the terrifying ritual in which blindfolded girls proceed into a cave to encounter a prophetic snake that will pass judgment on their virginity. Aelian claims that the cave is located in Lavinium within a densely wooded grove that is situated beside a temple of Argive Hera (ἐν τῷ Λαουινίῳ ἄλσος τιμαῖται μέγα καὶ δασύ, καὶ ἔχει πλησίον νεῶν Ἡρας Ἀργολίδος, NA II.16, p. 267, lines 19–20). But Aelian has his geography wrong. This ritual, described in detail also by Propertius (4.8.3–14), actually took place in Lanuvium (not Lavinium), in a cave adjacent to the temple of Juno Sospita. “Old Lanuvium,” writes Propertius, “is the guardian of an ancient snake” (*Lanuuium annosi vetus est tutela draconis*, 4.8.3), and we even have a series of coins from

⁵² Cf. also NA 14.8, on the founding of Patavium (Padua) by the Trojan Antenor, “amplificando il contributo della stirpe troiana alle vicende italiane” (Schettino 2005: 302). On Aelian's depiction of Aeneas at VH 3.22, see Anderson 1993: 122.

c. 70 BCE depicting a female figure feeding a ritual meal to a giant snake, with the face of Lanuvium's Juno Sospita stamped on the obverse.⁵³ Confusion between Lavinium and Lanuvium, even among inhabitants of Italy, was common enough in antiquity – Civita Lavinia, the medieval name of Lanuvium, attests to the persistence of that confusion. But in Aelian's case it is no mere slip of the pen, for the digression on the legendary founding of Rome's so-called "grandmother" city makes it clear that Aelian has in mind the town of Lavinium.⁵⁴

Even though Aelian probably never left Italy, we know that he at least traveled within the Italian peninsula: at *NA* 2.56 he speaks of a journey from Naples to Dikaiarkhia (Pozzuoli) when the sky rained frogs. But had Aelian ever actually been to Lavinium or Lanuvium? The journey would not have been a long one: Lanuvium was only about 35 kilometers from both Rome and Praeneste, while Lavinium was only about 30 kilometers due south of Rome, as the crow flies. Had Aelian attended the very ritual about which he writes? If so, did he think he was in Lavinium and did he not realize that he was actually in Lanuvium? Or did he learn of the ritual from a literary source or from hearsay? If so, did the source(s) get the name of the town right, and did Aelian mistakenly transpose the ritual to Lavinium? Unfortunately we do not know the answer to these questions. Whatever the scenario, however, we are left with the image of a scholar who was not overly concerned with facts – fair enough. But we can look at Aelian's scholarly mistake more productively: in locating the archaic ritual in Lavinium, Aelian constructs an associative, thematic relationship between the cult practice and Rome's legendary Trojan past.

Aelian's description of the temple adjacent to the cave as belonging to Argive Hera is also curious. The temple of Juno Sospita in Lanuvium was a famous one throughout Rome's history. Livy says that it came under the control of the Roman *pontifices* at a very early period, after Rome's conquest of Lanuvium in 338 BCE. Furthermore, the temple is frequently cited for its many portents and omens throughout the third and second centuries BCE, and Juno Sospita receives sacrifices alongside Rome's other tutelary deities.⁵⁵ Clearly, then, the cult, whose origins in Italy extend back probably to the sixth century BCE, was known to the Romans through the earliest Latins, and Aelian seems to make this connection by prefacing his account of the snake ritual with a summary of Rome's Italian genealogy through the family of Latinus. On the other hand, Aelian also indicates

⁵³ Douglas 1913: 62, 70, Gordon 1938: 33, and Ogden 2013: 205–206; on the cult sanctuaries of Lanuvium, see Coarelli 1987: 141–163.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 21. ⁵⁵ Liv. 8.14.2, 21.62.4, 22.1.17, 23.31.15, 24.10.6, 29.14.3, 31.12.6, 40.19.2.

how over the years the cult had become Hellenized, for the temple adjacent to the cave belongs, not to Juno Sospita, but to Argive Hera. Perhaps Aelian is implying the greater Italian antiquity of the ritual of the snake and the virgins in the cave, which we can only assume was also associated with the cult of Hera/Juno on the adjacent hillside. Douglas notes that, “The two rites remained distinct and incongruous,”⁵⁶ and one senses that incongruity in Aelian’s somewhat jumbled account.

Nevertheless, as Aelian struggles to harmonize Roman and Greek culture in this mini-dissertation on Roman legend and religion, the imagery and themes at play in *NA* 11.16 connect this passage with the preceding passage on the elephant that avenged his cuckolded Roman master. An integral part of the cult of Hera at Argos and presumably also at Lanuvium was the *hieros gamos*, commemorating Hera’s holy marriage to Zeus. In this ritual the image of the goddess was carried in procession in a cart drawn by white oxen, while hymns were sung to the accompaniment of pipes. The festival also included games and dancing in honor of the goddess.⁵⁷ Hera’s temple at Argos also evoked the goddess’ marriage to Zeus visually, as Pausanias makes clear. Hera’s couch (κλίνη τῆς Ἥρας, Paus. 2.17.3) was displayed prominently in the front chamber of the temple, and the image of the cuckoo that sat atop the scepter of Hera’s cult statue symbolized the myth that, when Zeus “fell in love with the virgin Hera (παρθένου τῆς Ἥρας), he changed himself into this bird, but that she chased him like a pet” (2.17.4).

Following Aelian’s reference to Argive Hera, we may read the description of the ritual of the virgins and the snake in the cave alongside the tradition of the *hieros gamos*. I do not suggest that the ritual was in reality associated with the celebration of the *hieros gamos*; we have already seen, though, that Aelian is not as concerned with facts and reality as perhaps he could be. My point, rather, is that there is a strong thematic relationship between the story of the elephant that was indignant at his mistress’ infidelity, the story of Aeneas’ founding of Lavinium, the ritual of the virgins in the cave, and its association with Argive Hera. In all of these narratives, Aelian has marriage on the mind, both the ideal notion of marriage that was central to Roman culture, as well as the specters of infidelities and betrayals that plague marriage. But whereas Rome’s cultural ideology by and large championed the ordering of Imperial society on the basis of marriage and family life, Aelian’s narratives cast light on the unstable foundations of that ideology.

⁵⁶ Douglas 1913: 71; see also Gordon 1938: 38–41.

⁵⁷ Farnell 1896: 1.187–188; Douglas 1913: 68.

Going back to Aelian's account of the foundation of Lavinium, we are emphatically reminded that Aeneas' Italian future entailed a new marriage to an Italian princess, despite that Aeneas' heir was the product of his marriage with the Trojan Creusa (Ἀσκάnios ὁ Αἰνείου καὶ Κρεούσης τῆς Τροάδος, *NA* II.16, p. 267, lines 17–18). The role of husband did not suit Aeneas well. Leaving aside the notoriously problematic relationship with Dido,⁵⁸ Aeneas' abandonment of Creusa as Troy burned around her complicates an optimistic appreciation of the legendary hero. Vergil's account of this incident (*A.* 2.735–795) is ambiguous at best,⁵⁹ but Ovid's version is typically pessimistic when he gives voice to Dido's sufferings in the *Heroides*:

omnia mentiris, neque enim tua fallere lingua
incipit a nobis, primaque plector ego.
si quaeras, ubi sit formosi mater Iuli –
occidit a duro sola relicta viro!

(*Ov. Ep.* 7.81–84)

Everything you say is a lie, and your tricky tongue didn't begin with me, nor am I the first to suffer. Where, you ask, is the mother of handsome Iulus? Dead, left behind all alone by her hard-hearted husband.

But the husband is not the only one at fault in Aelian's subtle commentary on Roman marriage, for stories like that of the elephant trainer's unfaithful wife also provoke suspicions about wifely fidelity. In an atmosphere fraught with such erotic anxiety, how could a Roman man ever be sure that his wife was a virgin on their wedding night? If a man cannot recognize a virgin just by looking, there is at least one snake that can.⁶⁰

At this point Aelian's description of the ritual should be considered in detail:

ἐν δὲ τῷ ἄλσει φωλεός ἐστι μέγας καὶ βαθύς, καὶ ἔστι κοίτη δράκοντος. παρθένοι τε ἱεραὶ νενομισμέναις ἡμέραις παρίασιν ἐς τὸ ἄλσος ἐν τοῖν χεροῖν φέρουσαι μάζαν καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τελαμῶσι κατείλημμέναι· ἄγει δὲ αὐτάς εὐθύωρον ἐπὶ τὴν κοίτην τοῦ δράκοντος πνεῦμα θεῖον, καὶ ἀπταίστως προΐασι βάδην καὶ ἡσυχῇ, ὥσπερ οὖν ἀκαλύπτοις ὁρώσαι τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς. καὶ ἂν μὲν παρθένοι ᾧσι, προσίεται τὰς τροφὰς ἀγνάς ὁ δράκων καὶ πρεπούσας ζῶω θεοφιλεῖ· εἰ δὲ μή, ἅπαστοι μένουσι, προειδότης αὐτοῦ τὴν φθορὰν καὶ μεμαντευμένου. μύρμηκες δὲ τὴν μάζαν τὴν τῆς διακορηθείσης εἰς μικρὰ καταθρύψαντες, ὥς ἂν εὐφορα αὐτοῖς εἴη, εἴτα

⁵⁸ *nec coniugis umquam | praetendi taedas aut haec in foedera veni*, Verg. *A.* 4.338–339.

⁵⁹ See Perkell 1981 and Hughes 1997.

⁶⁰ On the test of virginity, see Sissa 1987; Brethes 2007: 259–260 connects this passage with the tests of virginity in Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Kleitophon*.

ἐκφέρουσιν ἔξω τοῦ ἄλσους, καθαίροντες τὸν τόπον. γνωρίζεται τε ὑπὸ τῶν ἐπιχωρίων τὸ πραχθέν, καὶ αἱ παρελθοῦσαι ἐλέγχονται, καὶ ἡ γε τὴν παρθενίαν αἰσχύνασα ταῖς ἐκ τοῦ νόμου κολάζεται τιμωρίαις. μαντικὴν μὲν δὴ δρακόντων ἂν ἀποφύναμι τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον. (*NA* II.16, p. 267, line 20–p. 268, line 8)

And in the grove there is a large, deep lair, and it is the bedding place of a serpent. And sacred virgins on days established by custom come to the grove, carrying barley cake in their two hands, with their eyes covered with linen blindfolds, and a holy spirit leads them straight into the cave of the serpent, and without stumbling they go forward step by step and peacefully, as if seeing with uncovered eyes. And if they are virgins, the serpent accepts the food as being pure and proper for a creature beloved of god. But if they are not virgins, they remain uneaten, since he foresaw the corruption and divined it. And ants, when they have broken the barley cake of the deflowered girl into tiny pieces, so it might be portable, then carry it out of the grove, cleansing the place. And what has transpired becomes known to the inhabitants, and the girls who came are put to the test, and she who defiled her virginity is punished with the customary penalties. Indeed the mantic art of serpents I would represent in this way.

This would have been a terrifying ordeal for the girls who were forced to proceed blindfolded into the murky, primordial cave. It would have been all the more terrifying to think that their reputation and salvation depended upon whether the subterranean creature deemed their pathetic barley cake appetizing or not. In Aelian's account, the girls who come out of the ordeal safely are unremarkable; rather, the narrator's interests rest with the unlucky girl whose barley cake the serpent would not touch. The story's emphasis on the snake's divine ability to identify corruption (τὴν φθοράν) prompts Aelian's brief, curious digression on the involvement of some attendant ants, a detail mentioned in none of the other accounts of this strange Latin ritual. But Aelian's ants, alluding, I suggest, to the myth of Zeus' rape of Aegina and Hera's subsequent wrath, provide a further mythical dimension to the narrative's thematic concerns with marriage and erotic suspicion. In that myth, serpents and ants serve as animal agents of the plots of Hera and Zeus respectively. Discovering that Zeus had seduced Aegina and sired the hero Aeacus, Hera plagued Aeacus' island with a poisonous serpent. But Zeus offered assistance, transforming an army of ants into an army of men, the Myrmidons, who take their name from the Greek word for ants, μύρμηκες.⁶¹ In the myth, Zeus' transformation of the ants rectifies the damage caused by Hera's pestilential serpent, but in Aelian's narrative, that

⁶¹ Hyg. *Fab.* 52; Ovid has Aeacus narrate his own story (*Met.* 7.518–660), where Juno plagues the island with not one, but with many thousands of serpents (*miliaque . . . serpentum multa*, 534).

symmetry is lost: the ants in the cave are merely ministers of the serpent, clearing away the impure barley cake whose presence defiles the holy place. In this narrative, Hera's serpentine anxiety dominates, marking out for the Latin population those girls who have been defiled. This archaic Latin ritual, therefore, connects the cosmically imbalanced relationship between Hera and Zeus with the problematic marriages of Aeneas, culminating in his politically motivated union with Lavinia.

Reading this narrative alongside the preceding stories of Laenilla and of the elephant that avenges his cuckolded master, we get a deeply pessimistic (albeit partial) view of Roman marriage.⁶² In contrast to the idealized image of the *sanctum coniugium* propagated during the Augustan period and reinforced under Septimius Severus, what emerges from these narratives is an impressionistic picture of the Roman family characterized by deception, treachery, humiliation, fear, and violence. Even the humorously touching story of Crassus' eel reflects an emotional coldness thought to be typical of the relationship between Roman husbands and wives. And the stories of the murderous Laenilla, the cuckolded elephant master, and the blindfolded girls, all emphasize the powerlessness of their Roman characters. Animals in the wild show more familial *pietas* than does an infamous wife of the senatorial class; the Indian elephant does for his Roman master what the master himself cannot do; and the mantic snake dwelling beneath the Latin soil is a terrifying illustration of patriarchal erotic anxiety institutionalized within the social and religious apparatus. All of these animal narratives reveal the dark heart at the center of Rome's cultural ideology of marriage and family, and Aelian's learned cultural zoology thus turns out to be a sophisticated medium for deconstructing a foundational institution of the Roman social order.

Conclusion

Aelian's interest in the relationship between Greek and Roman is signaled in the very first chapter of the *NA*, about the birds of Diomedes. Not only does the story announce the theme of the privilege of Greek culture in a world of Western barbarians (i.e., Romans), but its etiology of the birds' transformation from human men evokes for Roman readers the two most canonical texts of Latin poetry: Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Consideration of the relevant passages from Vergil and Ovid reveals that there is latent in Aelian's programmatic opening story also an interest in

⁶² Cf. *NA* 7.17, 7.25, 8.17, 8.20, 9.21, 11.34.

the potentially fraught relationship between the writer and the *princeps*, a theme that I explore more fully in [Chapter 9](#). Explicitly, though, the story of the birds of Diomedes speaks to the dual anxiety inherent in the cultivation of a classical Greek literary persona: his perpetuation of the fiction of an essential Greek identity is an indication of his concern not to appear too Roman.

This second facet of Aelian's literary persona, the distancing of himself from Roman identity, is seen in a number of chapters in the *NA* where Aelian treats stories and characters from the Roman past. In the famous story of the Capitoline geese, for instance, Aelian refuses to self-identify as Roman, though it is easy to sense in his narration a resident's familiarity with the details of the folk story. In other chapters, there is a noticeable distancing from Roman political authority, both from the principate (in the figure of Augustus) and from the senate. Aelian even disassociates the Roman *fusces* from their symbolic political power by contextualizing them within a transcultural discourse about the religious symbolism of birds. In an important chapter on the peacock, Aelian expresses a lasting pessimism about the barbaric quality of Roman culture, a challenge to Rome's participation in an ideal vision of a humanistic, international Hellenism.

It is through the medium of Hellenism that Aelian offers his own literary transformation of the violence associated with the Roman animal spectacle: in the *NA* the scholarly pursuit becomes a substitution for the *venatio*, or "hunt." In his elaborate account of the elephants that performed at the shows produced by Germanicus Caesar, Aelian displaces the most quintessential act of Roman identity – writing Latin – onto trained animals, thereby offering a sophisticated commentary on the culturally constructed quality of Romanness. This story should be read alongside Aelian's chapter on the peacock, for the latter, operating along cultural stereotypes, condemned the Roman as an essentially brutish, Hortensian figure. This chapter on the performing elephants, however, rejects the essentialist theory of cultural identity and offers instead the liberating possibility that if Roman character is constructed, then there remains a real possibility for the transformation of one's self and of one's culture.

Finally, Philostratus' biographical notice that Aelian never married or had children is complemented by the negative depiction of Roman marriage and family life throughout the *NA*. Even if Aelian believed in the possibility of actually achieving the ideals of harmonious marriage within stable family, the central institutions of Roman ideology, that optimism does not come across in the narratives themselves. Aelian critiques marriage and family not just on the basis of personal anecdote, as in the story of Laenilla,

but also as they pertain to numerous areas within the culture of public discourse, namely politics, myth, legend, and religion. Though in his later work he comes out as Roman and still manages to maintain his Greek literary persona, it is safe to say that Aelian did not define his Roman identity through participation in married domestic life.

*Stoicism***Aelian the philosopher?**

Despite the philosophical orientation of many of his animal narratives, it is nevertheless difficult to speak of Aelian's philosophical thought as entirely consistent.¹ On the contrary, Aelian's approach to philosophy in the *NA* may be described as eclectic, as he draws upon Platonic and Aristotelian texts as well as upon later developments in Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, Cynicism, and even Epicureanism. Traditionally, however, scholars have been most interested in the influence of Stoicism on Aelian's thought. Aelian's Stoicism was hardly dogmatic, and this is consistent with the searching, fragmented image of the author that I outlined in the introduction. In the nineteenth century, Schöner argued that Aelian adhered to Stoic doctrine, though conceding that Aelian indulged in a mixture of ancient philosophical teachings; Wellmann, however, denied that Aelian was a Stoic, asserting instead that his philosophical thought represented a debased form of popular belief.² A century later, Díaz-Regañón López writes of Aelian as a committed Stoic who shared even their doctrinal belief denying animals *logos*, though that belief did not in the least prevent Aelian from admiring animals' obedience to a superior nature.³ Hübner found Aelian's deviation from Stoic thought more problematic, sensing an affiliation with Plutarch in Aelian's resistance to the Stoic position that animals do not participate in the divine *logos*.⁴ Kindstrand, reformulating Wellmann's position in terms less disparaging than those of his distinguished predecessor, describes Aelian's texts as reflecting a generally philosophical attitude, constructed

¹ Aelian the Platonist (Αἰλιανὸς ὁ Πλατωνικός, Porph. *In Harm.* 96 Düring) should not be confused with Claudius Aelianus, nor should the fragments of that philosopher's commentary on the *Timaeus* be included among Aelian's fragments (Porph. *In Harm.* 33–37, 91, 96 Düring=Ael. frs. 25–27 Domingo-Forasté). See Goulet 1989: 78, Dörrie and Baltes 1993: 217, and Nesselrath 1995.

² Schöner 1873: 18–34 and Wellmann 1894: 486.

³ Díaz-Regañón López 1983: 421. ⁴ Hübner 1984: 156.

for the most part from Stoic and Cynic thought, that was typical of the educated elite of the early third century.⁵

Manuela García Valdés, following the important work of Martha Nussbaum,⁶ considers the influence of Aristotelian thought, whether direct or indirect, on Aelian. García Valdés focuses especially on the way in which Aristotle complicated the philosophical approach to animal behavior, which in Plato was sharply distinguished from rational human behavior. Aristotle went a long way in showing that there was not after all such a clear distinction between the rational, voluntary behavior of humans and the putatively irrational, involuntary behavior of non-human animals. The human child offers a compelling analogy. The child's appetitive desires are, through a process of socialization, made to conform to normative expectations, and in this way the human child is transformed into what appears to be a human adult characterized by rational, voluntary action. Therefore, according to Aristotle's thinking, the appetitive desires even of non-human animals must contain at least an element of rationality. To paraphrase García Valdés: if we do not despise the animal nor over-value the rational, we will be better able to understand the extent to which the one contributes to the blossoming of the other. And this is, for García Valdés, the ideological foundation that facilitates Aelian's own thinking about and representation of animals as moral examples for human beings.⁷ But Aelian was not an orthodox disciple of Aristotelian doctrine, and the Aristotelian influence identified by García Valdés was filtered through Stoicism, the dominant school of philosophical thought in the Roman Imperial period. After her own detailed analysis of Stoic thought in the *NA*, García Valdés concludes that while the Stoic background was certainly influential, Aelian's central ideas regarding the moral superiority of animals depart sharply from Stoicism and are in fact more consistent with Epicurean or Cynic thought.⁸

I argue here first that Aelian may be understood as a Stoic only in the most general sense. In this I agree with Wellmann, Kindstrand, and García Valdés. Aelian's "loose" Stoicism should not imply, however, that he was a failed philosopher, intellectually weak, or merely subscribing to belief that was either popular or typical of the educated elite.

This leads to my second point: Aelian was well aware of the specifics of Stoic thought and was even familiar with Stoic technical terminology, but the literary and rhetorical character of his work made extended

⁵ Kindstrand 1998: 2990.

⁶ Nussbaum 2001: 264–289.

⁷ García Valdés 2003: 10–11.

⁸ *Ibid.* 46.

philosophical discourse unsuitable. Not only does Aelian at one point declare that he has no time for philosophizing (*NA* 5.1), but he even declares, “let us leave it to Demokritos and the others to think that they are able to explain causes for things obscure and unintelligible” (ταῦτα Δημοκρίτῳ τε καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις καταλείπωμεν ἐλέγχειν τε καὶ τὰς αἰτίας οἶεσθαι λέγειν ἱκανοῖς ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀτεκμάρτων τε καὶ οὐ συμβλητῶν, 6.60). One must therefore not confuse literary and rhetorical artifice with a lack of intellectual depth; Aelian’s compilatory, multifaceted art, in fact, has its own philosophical implications.

Third, in his treatment of the relationship between animals and the divine *logos* of the Stoics, Aelian’s language reveals a complex renegotiation of the terms of the debate.⁹ On the one hand, Aelian partially relies upon traditional terminology that seems to reinforce the Stoic position that animals lack reason. He continues, for example, to refer to animals throughout the *NA* by means of the philosophically loaded word ἄλογα, “things lacking *logos*.” On the other hand, Aelian imputes to animals numerous human virtues that have been granted by nature (φύσις), which itself is consistently equated with a divine force, and both of these are ultimately unknowable and “unspeakable” (ἀπόρητα). By this reasoning, animals’ participation in divine *logos* may be merely glimpsed through their reported behavior and is ultimately one of the divine mysteries. To such mysteries, even doctrinal Stoicism itself is blind.

Aelian’s animal narratives explore the limits of traditional Stoicism, and his philosophical idiosyncrasies reveal not a failed philosopher but rather the failure of doctrinal Stoicism to remain relevant to the variable literary artist of the Severan age. I resist the notion that the *NA* projects a single, fully formed and coherent philosophical persona. The *NA* is not, I stress, a philosophical treatise, nor is its aim ultimately to offer a coherent philosophical argument, despite the programmatic moralizing claims of the authorial voice in the preface and epilogue. One may attempt to reconstruct a coherent philosophical position from the various chapters of the *NA*, but the fragmentary, variegated nature of the text confounds those attempts from the outset. Rather than fault Aelian, however, for his presumed philosophical incoherence, I instead see the text’s philosophical contradictions and literary fragmentation as signs of the difficulties inherent in formulating novel responses to the moral failures of Severan Rome.

⁹ Cf. Zucker 2000, who recognizes human possession of *logos* as paradoxically a privilege but also a handicap in the *NA*.

Stoic doctrine in the third century

The mark of Stoicism on Aelian's writing is everywhere apparent. But before proceeding to the identification of Stoic ideas in Aelian's text, a brief survey of the doctrines of Stoicism is called for. These doctrines as outlined in the "Life of Zeno" by Diogenes Laertius, Aelian's near contemporary, present a clear picture of how Stoicism was understood by the early third century and should therefore suffice as the background against which Aelian's own Stoic thought might be considered.¹⁰ Zeno divided philosophical thought into three parts: that which pertains to reason or *logos* (logic), that which pertains to character or *êthos* (ethics), and that which pertains to nature or *physis* (physics). None of these must be taught alone, and all must be taught together as being interrelated. The Stoic philosophers Apollodorus, Chrysippus, and Eudromus all, according to Diogenes, likened philosophy to an animal: "comparing logic to the bones and sinews, ethics to the parts that are more fleshy, and physics to the soul" (7.40). Despite this simile, according to which animals provide a model for the very system that these philosophers describe, animals pose a continual philosophical problem in Stoic thought, as we shall see. Diogenes offers detailed descriptions of each branch of Stoic philosophy,¹¹ but what follows is by no means a complete summary; I have instead restricted this exposition of Diogenes' Stoic doxography to those doctrines that are most relevant to an understanding of Aelian's philosophical and religious thought.

Logic is divided into the study of rhetoric and dialectic. By rhetoric is meant "the science of speaking well regarding words in narrative" (7.42), while dialectic is the science "of conversing properly regarding words in question and answer." There are in turn three kinds of rhetoric (deliberative, forensic, and panegyric) and the science of rhetoric as a whole is divided into the invention of argument (εὑρεσις), style or expression (φράσις), the arrangement of the material (τάξις), and the performance or delivery (ὑπόκρισις). Any speech conforming to the rules of rhetoric should be divided into an introduction (προοίμιον), narrative exposition (διήγησις), replies to one's opponents (τὰ πρὸς τοὺς ἀντιδίκους), and a conclusion

¹⁰ Diogenes' "kaleidoscopic" presentation of his material bears similarity to Aelian's own literary aesthetic: "The thoroughgoing fragmentation of subject matter and authority creates an almost irresistible temptation for the reader to ignore the author's literary pretensions, simply to enjoy the parade of images and ideas, ostensibly emanating from a chorus of ancient authorities" (Hahm 1992: 4077). On Diogenes' composition of the Stoic doxography in particular, see Hahm 1992: 4145–4165.

¹¹ Logic (7.42–83), ethics (7.84–131), physics (7.132–160).

or peroration (ἐπίλογος). These ideas would have been well known to Diogenes' readers as well as to Aelian and his readers, steeped as they all were in the rhetorical culture of the early third century, which was by no means exclusively Stoic.

Diogenes spends considerably more time, however, in laying out the Stoic emphasis on dialectic and its division into the subjects of discourse (or even, perhaps, "the things impressed upon the soul"; *σημαινόμενα*) and the language by means of which dialogue is conducted (*φωνή*). According to Diogenes, Stoic philosophers believe that,

οὐκ ἄνευ δὲ τῆς διαλεκτικῆς θεωρίας τὸν σοφὸν ἄπτωτον ἔσεσθαι ἐν λόγῳ·
τό τε γὰρ ἀληθὲς καὶ τὸ ψεῦδος διαγιγνώσκεισθαι ὑπ' αὐτῆς καὶ τὸ πιθανόν
τό τ' ἀμφιβόλως λεγόμενον διευκρινεῖσθαι· χωρὶς τ' αὐτῆς οὐκ εἶναι ὁδὸν
ἔρωτᾶν καὶ ἀποκρίνεσθαι. (D.L. 7.47)

Only with dialectic theory will a wise man never be thrown in dialogue, for truth and falsehood are distinguished by means of it and proper judgment is made between what is persuasive and what is ambiguous. And without dialectic it is not possible to question and respond in a systematic manner.

Even the very best training in rhetoric, therefore, is not enough for being considered "wise" (*σοφός*) according to Stoic doctrine. The ideal Stoic philosopher must be equally well versed in formulating a rational argument as in defending that argument against criticism. This is the process through which philosophical dialogue removes the underbrush of false opinion and reveals truth.

Ethics, the second branch of Stoic philosophy, may be divided into: impulse (*ὁρμή*), good and evil (*ἀγαθὰ καὶ κακὰ*), emotions or passions (*πάθη*), virtue or excellence (*ἀρετή*), the end (*τέλος*), primary value and actions (*ἡ πρώτη ἀξία καὶ πράξεις*), what is proper or fitting (*τὰ καθήκοντα*), and what induces one to action or turns one away from acting (*προτροπαὶ τε καὶ ἀποτροπαὶ*). Diogenes explains that these divisions did not originate with Zeno, but were later developments by Zeno's philosophical heirs.

Most relevant in Diogenes' discussion of the Stoic conception of ethics is the significance of animals and their role in nature. Nature (*φύσις*) was estimated by the Stoics as the supreme governing principle of the universe, in which case animals are idealized insofar as they live in accordance with nature. Commenting on the first book of Chrysippus' treatise *On Ends* (*Περὶ τελῶν*), Diogenes explains that,

Τὴν δὲ πρώτην ὁρμὴν φασὶ τὸ ζῶον ἴσχειν ἐπὶ τὸ τηρεῖν ἑαυτό, οἰκειούσης αὐτὸ τῆς φύσεως ἀπ' ἀρχῆς . . . ἀπολείπεται τοίνυν λέγειν συστημαμένην

αὐτὸ οἰκειῶσαι πρὸς ἑαυτό· οὕτω γὰρ τὰ τε βλάπτοντα διωθεῖται καὶ τὰ οἰκεῖα προσίεται. (D.L. 7.85)

An animal's first impulse, they say, is toward taking care of itself, since nature was bringing it into its domain from the beginning. . . . It remains then to say that [nature], when composing it [the animal], made it dear to itself. For thus it pushes away what is harmful and admits what is familiar.

And Zeno himself wrote that the ultimate goal of the virtuous life is “to live in agreement with nature” (7.87).¹² And this nature of which Zeno speaks, Diogenes continues, is nothing other than the “right reason” (ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος, 7.88), which is identical to Zeus himself.¹³ The suggestion that “reason” itself may be “right” implies of course that there is also “wrong reason,” and when a rational creature is perverted from what is right, it must be due to his own errors and not to nature itself, “since nature provides beginnings that are not perverted” (7.89).

Regarding the emotions or passions (πάθη), the Stoics claimed that the wise man was without passion (ἀπαθῆ, 7.117), a term which could however also be applied to the bad man, insofar as he is hard-hearted and not to be softened. This, however, is the cost of becoming wise, as in fact “they say that all excellent men are austere too, because they have no association with pleasure, nor do they accept invitations to pleasure from others.” Through their impassivity, the wise become, in a sense, “divine” or “godlike” (θεῖους, 7.119), and yet they do not place themselves above the gods. On the contrary, the Stoic authorities say that:

θεοσεβεῖς τε τοὺς σπουδαίους· ἐμπείρους γὰρ εἶναι τῶν περὶ θεοῦ νομίμων· εἶναι τε τὴν εὐσέβειαν ἐπιστήμην θεῶν θεραπείας. ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ θύσειν αὐτοὺς θεοῖς ἀγνοῦς θ' ὑπάρχειν· ἐκνεύειν γὰρ τὰ περὶ θεοῦ ἀμαρτήματα. καὶ τοὺς θεοὺς ἄγασθαι αὐτοὺς· ὁσίους τε γὰρ εἶναι καὶ δικαίους πρὸς τὸ θεῖον. μόνους θ' ἱερέας τοὺς σοφοὺς· ἐπεσκέφθαι γὰρ περὶ θυσιῶν, ἰδρύσεων, καθαρμῶν, καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς οἰκείων. (D.L. 7.119)

Excellent men revere the gods, for they are experienced in the traditional observances of the gods, and reverence is knowing how to serve the gods. Indeed they will sacrifice to the gods and remain pure, for they avoid what is improper concerning the gods. And they are in awe of the gods, for they are pious and righteous toward the divine. And only the wise are priests, for they have given consideration to sacrifices, the founding of temples, ritual purification, and the other things that are dear to the gods.

¹² See Long 1996: 147. On the views of Epictetus, see Long 2002: 182–185.

¹³ On the Stoic conception of the *orthos logos*, see Long 1996: 207–210.

Stoic reverence toward the gods is followed by reverence towards parents and brothers (7.120). The wise man will also take part in politics, they say, if nothing prevents him from doing so. And the independence that he achieves through his avoidance of the passions and from his reverence to the gods makes him truly free, whereas the bad remain slaves (7.122). Such freedom may even be seen as a kind of kingship; that is to say that only the wise are capable of ruling without being liable or accountable to anyone else. The Stoic philosopher indeed may become the ideal public man: the most suitable for holding office, he will be the best judge, the best orator. Further, the ethical austerity of the Stoic ruler will be reflected in his enactment of the law, even if that means he might risk seeming to be a tyrant: he will not relax the punishments that the laws indicate, nor will he wince at their severity (7.123).

In what seems a non-sequitur, Diogenes ends this section on the Stoic philosopher's aptitude for governance and public life by adding,

ἔτι γε τὸν σοφὸν οὐδὲν θαυμάζειν τῶν δοκούντων παραδόξων, οἷον Χαρώνεια καὶ ἀμπώτιδας καὶ πηγὰς θερμῶν ὑδάτων καὶ πυρὸς ἀναφυσήματα. ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδ' ἐν ἐρημίᾳ φασὶ βιώσεται ὁ σπουδαῖος· κοινωνικὸς γὰρ φύσει καὶ πρακτικὸς. (D.L. 7.123)

and furthermore [they say that] the wise man wonders at none of those things that seem paradoxical, such as the vaporous caverns of Charon, the ebb and flow of the tides, springs of hot water, and eruptions of fire. But indeed, they say, the excellent man will not live in solitude either, for he is by nature social and a man of action.

The connection between these two ideas seems odd at first. But in this section, Diogenes is drawing on the (now lost) first book of Chrysippus' *On Lives* (Περὶ βίων), so the remark about the philosopher's disinclination to wonder (θαυμάζειν) must be understood within the context of the discourse on the philosopher's public life. Given his deep understanding of nature and the divine reason that guides the natural world, the wise man will have transcended mere wonderment at natural phenomena. Those things that inspire wonder in less philosophical minds are things that to the Stoic philosopher will only *seem* to be paradoxical (τῶν δοκούντων παραδόξων). Philosophical learning offers insight into nature's mysteries and thus clarity of mind, while to be obsessed by false opinions draws one away from the sphere of public life and leads to a life of solitude.

Finally, as pertains to Stoic ethics, despite the fact that animals offer to humans a model for life in harmony with nature, animals are too dissimilar to humans for us to have a sense of right or lawful obligation towards them

(7.129). Stoicism thus clearly demarcates between humans as more elevated and non-human animals as a baser form of existence. Diogenes says that this tenet is set down in the first book of Chrysippus' *On Justice* (Περὶ δικαιοσύνης), and so even though the idea may not have originated with Zeno, it was by Aelian's time a well-established facet of Stoic thought.¹⁴

Regarding the Stoic study of things pertaining to nature, or physics, I will restrict the summary here to the topic of the gods and the divine, omitting the more technical passages of Diogenes' discussion, since they are only tangentially relevant to Aelian's representation of the divine. The world (κόσμος) is governed by the divine intellect (νοῦς) and by divine providence (πρόνοια). The divine intellect pervades the world in all its parts, though to varying degrees (7.138). Through some things *nous* is distributed as a "possession" (ἔξις), something that holds a body together, such as bones and sinews in an animal body.¹⁵ Through other things, however, the divine intellect proceeds as itself, as it does through the authoritative part of the soul, capable of the most elevated form of intellectual activity (139). So suffused with the divine intellect is the world, that Stoics believed the *kosmos* itself to be a living thing: rational (λογικόν), possessing a soul (ἔμψυχον), and intelligent (νοερόν) (142–143).¹⁶

Finally, there were attempts by Stoic intellectuals to align Stoic thought with traditional Hellenic thinking about the gods and the divine. The Olympian deities, for example, were explained by Stoics as various facets of the one god, and so,

Δία μὲν γὰρ φασὶ δι' ὃν τὰ πάντα, Ζῆνα δὲ καλοῦσι παρ' ὅσον τοῦ ζῆν αἵτιός ἐστιν ἢ διὰ τοῦ ζῆν κεχώρηκεν, Ἀθηνᾶν δὲ κατὰ τὴν εἰς αἰθέρα διατάσιν τοῦ ἡγεμονικοῦ αὐτοῦ, Ἥραν δὲ κατὰ τὴν εἰς ἀέρα, καὶ Ἥφαιστον κατὰ τὴν εἰς τὸ τεχνικὸν πῦρ, καὶ Ποσειδῶνα κατὰ τὴν εἰς τὸ ὑγρόν, καὶ Δῆμητραν κατὰ τὴν εἰς γῆν· ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τὰς ἄλλας προσηγορίας ἐχόμενοι τινος οἰκειότητος ἀπέδωσαν (7.147).

[People] say *Dia* on account of (*dia*) whom all things exist. And they call him *Zēna* to the extent that he is the cause of life (*zēn*) or pervades through life (*zēn*). And Athena because of the extension into the ether (*aithēr*) of

¹⁴ Cf. the position of Epictetus, who sees "God and non-human animals as a pair of simple extremes, and presents human beings as complex intermediaries. By virtue of our bodies, we are akin to the other animals, but by virtue of our minds, we are akin to God" (Long 2002: 157). But like Aelian, Epictetus in his treatment of non-human animals "can be neutral and even complimentary, depending on the needs of particular contexts" (173). On Posidonius, see Gill 2006: 285–287. See also Wildberger 2008: 47–70 and Newmyer 2008: 71–80.

¹⁵ See Long 1996: 233–234 and Gill 2006: 31–32.

¹⁶ This idea was asserted by Chrysippus, Apollodorus, and Posidonius; it was however denied by Boethus.

the authoritative part of the divinity. And Hera on account of its extension into the air (*aêr*). And Hephaistos on account of its extension into the fire through which it creates. And Poseidon on account of its extension into water. And Demeter on account of its extension into the earth. And likewise people gave [the divinity] his other forms of address also by fixing upon some characteristic.

With the old gods thus salvaged, Zeno, Chrysippus and the other leading Stoic intellectuals held that the world was guided by fate and that divination was real and valid, for, says Diogenes, “they prove that it is a skill on account of certain results” (149). It is unfortunate that Diogenes does not provide those “results,” but it suffices to understand the Stoic basis for the validity of divination: it was a means, through the natural phenomena of the world, for humans to comprehend the divine providence (*πρόνοια*) that governed the *kosmos* (149). Finally, Stoics upheld the traditional belief in guiding spirits (*δαίμονες*) and they affirmed that the traditional heroes, such as Achilles, Orestes, and Theseus were real, “the souls of excellent men which had been left behind” after their death (151).

Stoic doctrine in the *NA*

Concerning the Stoic study of logic, or that which pertains to the *logos*, Aelian would have been completely familiar with the branch that focused on rhetoric and that part of dialectic at least that focused on language (*φωνή*). Aelian’s interest in rhetoric and the care that he took with the linguistic style of his work has been established, and much of the rhetorical terminology employed by Aelian in the preface and epilogue of the *NA*¹⁷ would have been recognized by contemporary readers equally well versed in rhetorical training. As I indicated above, however, given the pervasiveness of such training in the second and third centuries, the rhetorical coloring of Aelian’s work *per se* should not be pressed too far as an indication of Stoic influence.

A more significant influence from Stoic thought may be seen in Aelian’s idealization of animals for living in harmony with nature, a central tenet of Stoic thought from the time of Zeno (D.L. 7.87). This notion underlies so much of Aelian’s presentation of material throughout the *NA* that only a few examples are necessary here. The *aitnaios* fish, Aelian writes, is faithful to its mate by nature, without the artificial conceits of dowry or marriage laws (*NA* 1.12). Nature unites the moray and the viper despite that the one

¹⁷ Cf. D.H. *Dem.* 51, D.L. 7.43.

dwells in the sea and the other on land (1.50). The chameleon adapts itself effortlessly to its natural surroundings (2.14). Animals are endowed with natural memory and have no need for artificial mnemonic systems (6.10, 7.48). Dogs, without the need of a doctor's knowledge, cure their ailments by eating certain grasses that grow naturally (8.8). In all these examples and in many, many more, animals attract the attention of the writer precisely because of their self-sufficiency and because they live in accordance with what nature has given them.

In stark contrast to Aelian's idealization of animals that live in harmony with nature is his condemnation of human perversion of nature's gifts. Throughout the *NA*, Aelian offers illustrations of these perversions as scabrous negative examples of what may be termed the *orthos logos* of the Stoics (D.L. 7.88), pointing to figures from both myth and history. From myth, Aelian deplores, among other things, the sorcery of Medea¹⁸ and Circe;¹⁹ the treachery of Alkinoe,²⁰ Laios,²¹ and Prokne;²² and the incest of Oedipus.²³ In terms of historical figures, Aelian decries a series of despotic tyrants: the Dionysii of Syracuse, Klearkhos of Heraklea, Apollodoros of Kassandrea, and Nabis of Sparta. The bee has a better understanding of the natural laws of kingship than those tyrants (*NA* 5.15, see [Chapter 9](#)). Aelian also condemns the murderers of Pompey and Olympias, the mother of Alexander, for failing to tend to their dead bodies, a natural right of the deceased, as indicated by the positive example of dolphins (12.6). The Athenians Kallias and Ktesippos and the Roman Hortensius, meanwhile, incur Aelian's opprobrium for their gluttony (3.42, 5.21). From Aelian's personal experience, there is the curious case of the Roman woman Laenilla, discussed in the previous chapter, who perverted the natural relationship of the family by making false accusations against her own children and having them killed so that she could carry on a sexual affair with one of her slaves (7.15). Aelian grieves, finally, in the epilogue because he has throughout his work praised the piety of animals while having to criticize the piety of humans (ep., p. 432, lines 1–2).

There is also throughout the *NA* a marked anxiety concerning pleasure (sexual or otherwise) that is characteristic of Stoic thought (D.L. 7.117). The over-indulgence in pleasure by many animals often meets with the author's criticism,²⁴ while conversely he praises those animals that impose limitations through sexual fidelity or that abstain altogether.²⁵ He is equally

¹⁸ *NA* 1.54, 2.14, 7.15, 14.25, 15.26. ¹⁹ *NA* 1.54, 2.14. ²⁰ *NA* 8.19.

²¹ *NA* 6.15. ²² *NA* 7.15. ²³ *NA* 3.47.

²⁴ Partridges: *NA* 3.5, 16; lustful fish: 1.2; cf. Opp. *H.* 4.40–126.

²⁵ Elephants especially, *NA* 4.31, 8.17, 10.1, but also the *aitmaios* fish, 1.13; pigeons, 3.5; and crows, 3.9.

suspicious of male effeminacy as a telltale sign of luxurious living, condemning, for example, the depilatory practices of the men of Tarentum and Etruria (*NA* 13.27). This is consistent with the hostility that Aelian shows towards the followers of Epicurus, whom he elsewhere stereotypes as being soft and effeminate and an infectious plague in Greek cities.²⁶ But Aelian's attitude towards pleasure is by no means univocal and consistent in the *NA*, as I discuss at length in [Chapter 8](#).

Religious piety towards the traditional gods and heroes is demonstrated throughout the *NA*, both in terms of a reverence for cult and in terms of a creative engagement with myth. Both of these facets of Aelian's religious piety will be treated at greater length in the following chapter. It suffices to say here that Aelian's religious piety is consistent with the characterization of Stoic piety described by Diogenes Laertius and quoted above (D.L. 7.119).

Aelian's reverence for filial piety, prized also by the Stoics, was indicated in part by his scorn for the Roman woman Laenilla. But positive examples of filial piety by non-human animals abound in the *NA*. Aelian offers, for example, the poignant description of a female dolphin's self-sacrifice to save her children, and the female dolphin is, for Aelian, of all creatures the most completely devoted to her children (φιλοτεκνότατος ἐς τὰ ἑσχατα, *NA* 1.17). There is also the tale told by Indian Brahmins, of the boy who sowed his dead parents into his head to carry them into exile, away from the ungrateful children who scorned them; for this act of extreme piety (τῆς εὐσεβείας τὴν ὑπερβολήν, 16.5), the god Helios transformed the boy into the beautiful, long-lived hoopoe.

Diogenes explains that by avoiding the passions and by revering the gods, the Stoic wise man would become truly free, whereas the rest of mankind would remain slaves (D.L. 7.122). This linking of wisdom and independence is also apparent in the *NA* and was the subject of [Chapter 1](#). It will be remembered that in the epilogue, while responding to those who might criticize his compositional method, Aelian declares, "I am not the slave of another's criticism and purpose, and I deny that I must follow someone else wherever he might lead me" (ep., p. 431, lines 6–8).²⁷ The author's avowed independence is a significant part of his persona, in that he draws attention to himself as a literary renegade, a quality that he valorizes as the mark of the wise man. Diogenes several times refers to the Stoic wise

²⁶ Frs. 10 and 39 Hercher, 10 and 42 Domingo-Forrasté; cf. *NA* 6.40 and *VH* 2.31.

²⁷ Related to Stoic independence and freedom is suicide: "even the most extreme of Stoic morals is practiced by animals: the suicide of a camel (3.47) and of a horse (4.7)," Hübner 1984: 160–161.

man as σπουδαῖος (“excellent, worth paying serious attention to”),²⁸ surely preserving a key word from the original writings of Zeno, Chrysippus, and the other Stoic philosophers. Furthermore, when describing the seriousness of his own research and literary activity in the second half of his prologue, Aelian embeds a cluster of words sharing the same stem (σπουδ-),²⁹ thereby evoking the Stoic background against which he defines the value of his own work. In other words, Aelian appropriates the language of Stoic wisdom for his own intellectual self-portrait.

Given the mostly idealized representation of animal behavior in the NA, it is perhaps surprising that Aelian seems also to uphold the Stoic tenet that animals lack the rational element (*logos*) that sets humans apart as superior. Despite his thoroughgoing idealization of animals and despite that animals serve as positive foils for the moral corruption of humans, Aelian nevertheless throughout the work consistently refers to non-human animals as “creatures without *logos*” (ἄλογα ζῷα) and even explicitly asserts that non-human animals have no share of *logos* (NA 2.11, p. 35, lines 2–7; 11.31). Aelian thus retains Stoic language when writing about animals, even if at the same time he challenges readers to reconsider the criteria according to which humans are generally distinguished as superior.

Aelian is hardly naïve when it comes to the question of animal intelligence. Discussing the fidelity of dogs, for example, Aelian offers an elaborate narrative concerning King Pyrrhos of Epiros, who once on a journey encountered a corpse and beside the corpse a faithful dog that would not leave the side of its deceased master, even though the dog was suffering from severe starvation. The king tended the dog, and in turn the dog became a faithful companion of the king. One day the dog accompanied the king while he was inspecting his troops, but when the dog recognized among the soldiery the murderers of his former master, he could not contain himself and tried to indicate the soldiers by jumping, barking, and clawing at them. Knowing the dog’s character, Pyrrhos naturally became suspicious: on the evidence of the dog’s behavior, the soldiers were arrested and tortured, and they confessed their crime. The moralizing voice of the narrator then comes to the fore:

καὶ δοκεῖ μὲν μῦθος ταῦτα τοῖς ὅσοι Διὸς ἑταιρείου καὶ φίλου τοῦ αὐτοῦ
θεσμὸν πατήσαντες εἴτα μέντοι ζῶντας προύδοσαν τοὺς φίλους καὶ ἀπο-
θανόντας· ἐγὼ δὲ οὐ πείθομαι τοῖς νοοῦσι κακῶς τὰ τῆς φύσεως καλά,
ἥπερ οὖν εἰ τοῖς ἀλόγοις μετέδωκεν εὐνοίας τε καὶ στοργῆς, πάντως που

²⁸ D.L. 7.32, 33, 93–95, 113, 117–119, 123, 124, 128, 151.

²⁹ NA pr., lines 10 (ἐσπούδασται), 17 (οὐκ ἀσπούδαστον), 20 (σπουδάσαι), 23 (σπουδῆς ἄξιον).

καὶ τῷδε τῷ ζῳῷ τῷ λογικῷ μετέδωκε μᾶλλον. ἀλλὰ οὐ χρώνται τῷ δώρῳ. (*NA* 7.10)

And this seems like storytelling to those who, having trampled upon the bond of Zeus, the god of companions and friends, then betray their friends when they are living and when they are dead. But I myself don't listen to those people who ignore the benefits of nature, which therefore, if it grants to irrational creatures a share of goodwill and affection, grants a greater share in all ways, I suppose, even to this *logical* creature. But they don't take advantage of this gift.

We might expect from the way the story develops that Aelian would conclude with some such facile remark as “therefore dogs too have reason.” But the moralist momentarily forgets the dog and instead laments human failure to live up to our supposed rational superiority to animals. These remarks make it clear that Aelian appears to conform to the Stoic doctrine that humans alone of creatures have been endowed by nature with *logos*.³⁰ Further, Aelian declares that he wants nothing to do with those who disdain the rational faculty that nature has given them and whose life is therefore characterized by moral depravity.³¹ It should be noted, however, that Aelian's conformity to the Stoic division between rational humans and irrational beasts is not unqualified. Reconsider the statement that nature “grants a greater share in all ways, I suppose (που), even to this *logical* creature.” The apparently offhand “I suppose” subtly undermines the certainty of his assertion, and I shall argue below that such wavering is the sign of a more critical engagement with Stoic thought.

Diogenes noted that because animals were so fundamentally different from humans, it was not necessary for humans to harbor a sense of right toward animals (D.L. 7.129). The question of animals' “rights” in Aelian is difficult. Indeed, the writer will in the epilogue lament the destruction of animals in the hunt, offering his own book instead as a surrogate, non-violent means of taking pleasure in animals (*NA* ep. 431, lines 12–15). Elsewhere, however, in typically Stoic manner, Aelian condones the exploitation of animals by humans and even the killing of animals for religious purposes. The discourse on cattle that concludes Book 2 of the *NA* may be considered as representative:

Τὸ τῶν βοῶν ἄρα πάγχρηστον ἦν γένος, καὶ ἀνθρώποις ζῶον λυσιτελέστατον, καὶ εἰς γεωργίας κοινωνίαν καὶ εἰς ἀγωγὴν φόρτου διαφόρου. καὶ

³⁰ See also *NA* 6.16.

³¹ Cf. the moralizing statement that concludes the following narrative also: “And irrational creatures don't know these things, but humans who do know them don't bear them in mind” (καὶ ταῦτα μὲν οὐκ οἶδε τὰ ἄλογα, ἄνθρωποι δὲ εἰδότες οὐ φυλάττονται, *NA* 7.11).

γάλακτος ἐμπλήσαι βοῦς ἀγαθός ἐστι, καὶ βωμοὺς κοσμεῖ, καὶ ἀγάλλει πανηγύρεις, καὶ πανθοινίαν παρέχει. (NA 2.57)

The genus of cattle is indeed most useful, and for humans it is a creature most valuable, both for sharing the task of plowing and for the conveyance of various cargoes. And an ox is good at filling one up with milk, and it adorns altars, and it glorifies gatherings on holy days, and it offers a banquet for everyone

Aelian's lavish panegyric on cattle reveals the truth of the creature's role in religious festivals (πανηγύρεις): to praise the ox is to acknowledge its enslavement to human industry, its sacrifice at the altars of human gods, and its ability to feed the multitude. Elsewhere Aelian will even record miracles of the willing appearance of animals at the altar: they *want* to be sacrificed to the gods, freeing humans from any sense of guilt.³² To conform to Stoic thought in this regard is also to conform to a commonplace understanding of the place of animals in various facets of Roman life.³³

Connected with reverence for the gods and for cult worship is the Stoic belief in providence and divination (D.L. 7.149), a belief shared by Aelian. Mantic abilities or qualities are attributed to numerous animals in the NA.³⁴ Also of major significance in this regard are the surviving fragments from two of Aelian's lost works, *On Providence* (Περὶ προνοίας) and *On Manifestations of the Divine* (Περὶ θείων ἐναργειῶν), which apparently offered many illustrations of the divine intelligence that governs the world as well as the power of the gods to punish those who disdain that intelligence.³⁵

Finally, I should mention the Stoic emphasis on public life and the criticism of those who live their lives in solitude. One could perhaps claim that Aelian's turn away from the world of declamation in favor of the life of a scholar³⁶ may be construed somewhat as a retreat from public life. We should not forget, however, even though Aelian does not discuss it in the NA, that he also played a very public role as high priest. If the evidence of the *Souda* is to be believed, and Aelian was indeed an *arkhiereus* in Praeneste or Rome, then he would likely have agreed with Diogenes' summary of the Stoic notion that "only the wise are priests, for they have given consideration to sacrifices, the founding of temples, ritual purification, and the other things that are dear to the gods" (7.119).

³² NA 10.50, 11.4, 16.16. ³³ See Wilkins 2008.

³⁴ NA 1.10 (bees), 1.48 (raven), 2.46 (vulture), 2.51 (raven), 7.41 (ibis), 8.4 (crocodile), 8.5 (birds, fish), 8.9 (elephants), 11.16 (serpent).

³⁵ Kindstrand 1998: 2981–2983. ³⁶ NA Ep. 430, lines 10–12; cf. Philostr. VS 624.9–14.

Deviations from Stoic doctrine in the *NA*

Proceeding in order from Diogenes' doxography in the "Life of Zeno," the most striking deviation from Stoic doctrine in Aelian's *NA* is the nearly complete absence of dialectic. This was, according to Diogenes, a necessary complement to the study of rhetoric, and only through mastery of dialectic could the Stoic wise man gain a complete understanding of logic, or that branch of the philosophy concerned with *logos* (D.L. 7.47). The absence of dialectic in the *NA* would seem therefore to be a serious shortcoming for one striving to live up to the Stoic ideal, and this way of looking at the issue has led to disparaging characterizations of Aelian as a failed philosopher.³⁷ I do not want the preceding section of this chapter, detailing the overlap between the *NA* and Stoic doctrine, to give the impression that Aelian's intent was to fashion himself as a Stoic philosopher. Familiarity with the text, in fact, reveals a more varied and idiosyncratic approach to philosophical thought. It must be remembered that despite the significant influence of philosophy and despite its numerous philosophical elements, the *NA* is not a philosophical text, nor is Aelian to be understood as a philosopher: he is reluctant to identify himself as a philosopher and he is certainly not interested in the development of a philosophical argument. We must, rather, encounter Aelian on his own terms, as a writer. In order to understand Aelian's philosophical thought (if we can speak at all of a totalizing philosophical thought for this most polyphonic of writers), we must be attuned to those moments in the text when philosophy and literature intersect.

That said, I wish for the moment to consider the only instance in the *NA* when Aelian does broach the topic of dialectic, and it will become evident that, far from lacking understanding of this crucial branch of Stoic thought, Aelian in fact is familiar enough with dialectic that he is able to recognize and satirize those for whom the knowledge of dialectic is only partial. I refer to one of Aelian's personal anecdotes, quoted here in full:

Τὸ δέ γε ἐνθυμητικὸν καὶ διαλεκτικὸν καὶ τὸ τοῦδε μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦδε αἰρετὸν εἰ καὶ τὰ ζῷα οἶδεν, εἰκότως ἂν εἴποιμεν διδάσκαλον τῶν ὅλων τὴν φύσιν ἅμαχον. ἐμοὶ γοῦν τις γευσάμενος διαλεκτικῆς καὶ κυνηγεσίῳ ἀμωσγέπῳ ἐχόμενος τοιαῦτα ἔλεγεν. ἦν θηρατικὴ κύων, ἥ δ' ὅς. οὐκοῦν λαγῶ κατ' ἵχνια ἦει. καὶ ὁ μὲν οὐχ ἑωρᾶτό πῶ, μεταθέουσα δὲ ἡ κύων ἐντυγχάνει που τάφρῳ, καὶ διαπορεῖ ἄρά γε ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ ἄμεινον ἢ ἐπὶ θάτερα διώκειν· ὡς δ' ἀποχρώντως ἐδόκει σταθμῆσασθαι, εἶτα εὐθύωρον ὑπερεπήδησεν.

³⁷ Wellmann 1894: 486.

ὁ φάσκων οὖν διαλεκτικός τε εἶναι καὶ θηρατικός ταύτη πῇ συνάγειν τὴν ὑπὲρ τῶν λεχθέντων ἐπειρᾶτο ἀπόδειξιν. ἐπιστάσα ἡ κύων ἐσκοπεῖτο καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὴν ἔλεγεν ‘ἦτοι τῇδε ἢ τῇδε ἢ ἐκείνη ὁ λαγὼς ἐτράπετο. οὕτε μὴν τῇδε οὕτε τῇδε· ἐκείνη ἄρα.’ καὶ οὐ μοι ἐδόκει σοφίζεσθαι· τῶν γὰρ ἰχνῶν μὴ ὀρωμένων ἐπὶ τάδε τῆς τάφρου, κατελείπετο ὑπερπηδῆσαι τὸν λαγὼν αὐτήν. εἰκότως οὖν ἐπήδησε καὶ αὐτὴ κατ’ αὐτόν· ἰχνευτική γὰρ καὶ εὐρινος ἐκεῖνος ἢ ἐκείνη γε ἢ κύων ἦν. (NA 6.59)

If animals too were to understand syllogism³⁸ and dialectic and the choice of one thing over another, then I would reasonably say that nature is the invincible teacher of all things. At any event, a man who had had a taste of dialectic and who one way or another was addicted to hunting told me the following. There was a female hunting dog, he said. Now, she was on the trail of a hare. And the hare wasn’t to be seen anywhere, but the dog, running after it, encountered a trench at some point, and she was at a loss whether it was better to pursue to the right or to the left. And as she thought she had sufficiently calculated it, she then leapt straight over it. So the man who said that he was proficient in both dialectic and the hunt tried in the following way to formulate a proof in defense of what he had said. The dog, standing there, contemplated and said to herself, “The hare went either this way, this way, or that way. It didn’t go this way or this way; it went that way then.” And I don’t think she was dealing in subtleties, for since she couldn’t see the trail on this side of the trench, the remaining possibility was that the hare jumped over it. As was to be expected, then, she too jumped over after it, for he – or in this case she – was good at tracking and keen-scented.

Aelian begins from the Stoic position that animals do not in fact possess *logos* and that they are therefore incapable of higher-order philosophical thought, as it is exercised in syllogism and dialectic. He then introduces an anonymous interlocutor whom he humorously describes as having “had a taste of dialectic and who one way or another was addicted to hunting.” The man is obviously a dilettante, and his pretensions to philosophy cannot mask his true passion. The story that the man tells Aelian is an attempt to fuse hunting and logic, intellectualizing the one and offering a practical application of the other. Interestingly, though, the man does not offer

³⁸ A translation of ἐνθυμητικόν, attested by all the manuscripts. Hercher’s emendation, ἐνθυμητικόν, is attractive: “that which concerns the *enthymémē*,” Aristotle’s term for a rhetorical syllogism or deductive reasoning (*Rh.* 1356b), which would accurately describe the cogitation of the dog as ventriloquized by the dialectician-hunter. I nevertheless opt, along with GLR, for the reading of the manuscripts. Though the adjective ἐνθυμητικός is not in LSJ, Stephanus defined it in the *TLG* as “Promptus ad excogitandum, comminiscendum,” and this meaning could satisfactorily be applied to the substantive used by Aelian. But it seems most likely that Aelian (or his copyists) merely corrupted ἐνθυμητικόν to ἐνθυμητικόν, and the evidence of the anonymous commentary on Hermogenes’ *On legal issues* [Περὶ στάσεων], VII.603.15 Walz, shows that Aelian was not alone in doing so.

himself as combined logician and hunter, but instead projects that role onto the female dog, who in turn becomes the man's alter ego. When the man then tries to offer a proof (ἀπόδειξις) in defense of his self-identification as proficient in both dialectic and hunting, he himself performs the role of the philosophizing she-dog. In an intriguing syllepsis of genres, Aelian's text instantiates philosophy, narrative, and comic drama all at once.

After the man acts out the mental activity by which the dog chose to leap across the trench in pursuit of her quarry, Aelian's skeptical voice reasserts itself, doubtful that a mere process of elimination may be equated with dealing in subtleties (σοφίζεσθαι), the stuff of *real* philosophy. Her choice to leap over the trench was to be expected, considering that "he – or in this case she (ἐκεῖνος ἢ ἐκείνη γὰρ ἡ κύων) – was good at tracking and keen-scented." This final clause is difficult to translate and has posed a problem for editors of Aelian's text. The text as I have printed it reflects the reading of the majority of the manuscripts; there is only one minor variant, attested by a fourteenth-century manuscript (H): ἢ ἐκεῖνος ἢ ἐκείνη, the additional ἢ reinforcing the alternative subjects of the sentence, "*either* that man or that dog." Reiske and Hercher, however, both sought to eliminate the difficulty altogether by excising ἐκεῖνος ἢ from the text and making the female dog the unambiguous subject of the sentence. I think the manuscripts must be correct, though. Self-consciously mistaking the dog as male (ἐκεῖνος) like its human hunter, Aelian wittily signals to his readers how well the man performed the role of canine companion. The momentary confusion of man and dog deflates the hunter's philosophical pretensions. Through his debased act of dramatic *mimêsis*, he becomes ridiculous, and Aelian allows himself the exalted position as Stoic from which he might look down upon the hunter as a charming, but philosophically misguided rustic. *A philosophizing dog, indeed!*

But Aelian's arrogant Stoic position is itself a performance. Aelian has, I suggest, turned the tables on his philosophical critics. Standing back from this particular narrative and considering the *NA* in its totality, we see that Aelian is doing on a massive scale exactly the same thing as his hunter-dialectician, the putative target of his satire. The hunter is interested only in trying to prove the logical faculty of his hunting dog, whereas Aelian gives *all* animals center stage over the space of seventeen books and shows them to be possessed of a multitude of human virtues, possibly even of divine reason. The anonymous hunter-dialectician may therefore be read as Aelian's own alter ego, a knowing projection of the Stoic criticism that his text is un-philosophical, naïve, dilettantish. Meanwhile, in his own role as narrator, Aelian has anticipated and usurped the position of

philosopher-critic, brilliantly ventriloquizing the voice of the Stoic wise man, adept at sniffing out philosophical pretenders. What seems like consistency with Stoic doctrine turns out upon closer inspection to be a sophisticated literary satire exposing not the hunter-dialectician – an all too easy target – but the limits and short-sightedness of philosophical dogma, as Aelian the writer gets the upper hand.³⁹

Aelian's obvious fascination with the wonder inspired by natural phenomena is another remarkable departure from Stoic thought.⁴⁰ Diogenes Laertius of course said that the Stoic wise man, having mastered physics (*ta phusika*), would not be naïve enough to be overawed by the natural world (D.L. 7.123). Aelian's NA on the other hand simply luxuriates in paradoxography for its own sake, even when scientific explanations are available. A case in point is when he discusses the apparently mysterious quality of seawater to contain within itself sweet water suitable for drinking. Aelian's authority for the natural phenomenon is Empedokles, although he explicitly denies us Empedokles' scientific explanation: "and he tells the physical cause of this part that turns sweet in salt water, which cause you will learn from him" (καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν τοῦδε τοῦ ἐν τῇ ἄλμυ γλυκαινομένου λέγει φυσικὴν, ἣν ἐκεῖθεν εἴσασθε, NA 9.64). Denying the reader the scientific explanation, Aelian emphasizes instead the wonder inspired by the mysteries of nature. It should also be noted that this example offers not a complete denial of the scientific, but only a denial that is appropriate within the literary conventions of his text.

I suggest however that this is also more than literary convention, that Aelian's adoption of paradoxography as a primary literary medium reinforces his interest in the divine as well as his interrogation of Stoic doctrine. From the Stoic point of view, the paradoxographical quality of Aelian's work might seem like a failure to master *ta phusika*. Aelian however turns this perceived failure into a philosophical virtue. Time and again throughout the NA he attributes the strange, bizarre, and curious to "some unspeakable nature" (φύσις τις ἀπόρητος, *vel sim.*),⁴¹ his point being precisely that nature in its totality *cannot* be mastered, much less articulated by human beings. How could one claim to explain the miraculous generation of small fish in mud (NA 2.22) or the spontaneous veneration of the new moon by elephants (4.11)? There is a philosophical dimension to Aelian's religious piety. Just as in the preface Aelian appropriated the Stoic figure of the *spoudaios* and applied it to himself as an independent literary artist,

³⁹ Cf. S.E. P. 1.62–67, 72–76. ⁴⁰ Schöner 1873: 28–30.

⁴¹ NA 1.17, 34; 2.22, 48; 4.11, 24, 42; 5.1, 33, 49; 6.60; 8.9, 27; 9.36; 10.48; 11.7; 13.22; 15.1, 5, 17, 19; 16.34, 38; 17.15, 46; Ep. 430, line 20.

so here too he refigures his interest in *ta paradoxa* – so quintessentially *unStoic* – as the mark of one who is truly wise insofar as he does not claim to know the unknowable. Further, by attributing the overwhelming evidence of animal virtue to *phusis* as a divine mystery, Aelian simultaneously questions Stoic certainties regarding *logos* itself, which the Stoics equated with *phusis* and every other understanding of the divine.⁴² Through the language of an unspeakable, divine nature, Aelian restores to animals the possibility of rational *logos*, a possibility that Stoic doctrine denies. Regardless of Aelian's conventional application of the word ἄλογα to describe animals, one always gets the sense that Aelian is testing the limits of that word.

Aelian's probing, undoctinaire relationship with Stoicism can also be detected in the midst of a lengthy discourse on the Egyptian ibis:

καὶ τῷ Ἑρμῇ δὲ φασὶ τῷ πατρὶ τῶν λόγων φιλεῖται, ἐπεὶ ἔοικε τὸ εἶδος τῇ φύσει τοῦ λόγου· τὰ μὲν γὰρ μέλανα ὠκύπτερα τῷ τε σιγωμένῳ καὶ ἔνδον ἐπιστρεφόμενῳ λόγῳ παραβάλλοιτο ἄν, τὰ δὲ λευκὰ τῷ προφερομένῳ τε καὶ ἀκουόμενῳ ἤδη καὶ ὑπηρέτῃ τοῦ ἔνδον καὶ ἀγγέλῳ, ὡς ἂν εἴποις. (*NA* 10.29)

And they say that it is dear to Hermes, the father of *logoi*, since its form resembles the nature of *logos*, for its long, black quill feathers would be compared to the *logos* that is silent and turned inward, while its white feathers would be compared to the *logos* that is both brought forth and is actually heard, the servant and messenger of what is inside, so you might say.

This is a learned reference to a bit of Stoic technical terminology, adapted probably from Apion, whom Aelian cites elsewhere in the passage. Stoicism, and Aelian's work also for that matter, is premised on the idea of a transcendent, cosmic *logos* that pervades all matter, and the divine quality of this *logos* is manifested most intensely in living creatures. Stoic thought further divides human *logos* into the internal (*endiathetos*) and the external (*prophorikos*). The *logos endiathetos* signified the internal capacity for reason, while the *logos prophorikos* signified the capacity to express reason in speech.⁴³ Apion, then, could read the very body of the Egyptian ibis, with its stark contrast between black and white feathers, as nature's allegory for this Stoic bifurcation of *logos*.

This division of *logos* seems to correspond with the Stoic division between rhetoric and dialectic, the absence of which from the *NA* was playfully

⁴² Cf. Zucker 2000: 94.

⁴³ See Pohlenz 1965: 79–86, Mühl 1962: 7–56, Hülser 1987: 582–591, Chiesa 1991: 301–321, Matelli 1992: 43–70, Labarrière 1997: 259–279, Kamesar 2004: 163–181.

acknowledged by Aelian, as noted above. What then are we to make of Aelian's incorporation of this bit of Stoic erudition into his discourse on the ibis? Though Aelian may seem dismissive of the idea (ὥς ἂν εἴποις, he concludes ambiguously, "so you might say"), the allegory also offers an instructive truth for those who might seek to attack the un-philosophical orientation of Aelian's text. If the *logos endiathetos* is, like dialectic, more akin to the subtleties of "real" philosophy, then the *logos prophorikos*, relying on verbal and literary strategies, is related to rhetoric. But Aelian's text seems to reject the Stoic balance between the two forms of human *logos*, indulging instead in an extensive literary project of rewriting and recombining what has already been written about the virtue of animals. In other words, the *NA* is all *logoi prophorikoi*. The internal dialectic of Aelian the philosopher is off limits to the reader of his text; it is silent and turned inward, as symbolized by the black quill feathers of the ibis. It is not necessarily *absent*. What we get instead is the variegated literary exploration of the multifaceted understanding of the cosmic *logos* as it has been articulated across time and across cultures and ultimately filtered through the classicizing, syncretic Hellenism of the Roman Imperial era. Instead of penetrating to an understanding of the single, transcendent divine, the *NA* offers a cast of local gods and goddesses, from Spain to India, whose diverse methods of worship and relationships to different animals are more often represented by the author as curiosities to be wondered at and their narratives as fragmentary expressions for the reader's private philosophical or religious contemplation.

Conclusion

Aelian was a Stoic only in the most general sense. The *NA* reflects some central tenets of Stoic belief: the importance of rhetoric, the idealization of living life in harmony with nature, condemnation of human perversion of nature's gifts, anxiety concerning pleasure (sexual or otherwise), religious piety towards the traditional gods and heroes, the reverence for filial piety, and the emphasis on wisdom achieved through independence and impassivity. Aelian even retains traditional Stoic language when writing about animals, referring to them throughout the *NA* as "irrational," but he is also aware that his narratives about animal virtues push traditional Stoic language to its limits. Aelian thereby challenges readers to reconsider the criteria according to which humans are generally distinguished as superior, even as he appears to be complicit with human use of slave-animals for industry and the sacrifice of animals for religious purposes.

Despite these correspondences, there are also important deviations from Stoic doctrine in the *NA*, the most noteworthy of which is the nearly complete absence of dialectic, believed by the Stoics to be a necessary complement to the study of rhetoric. Aelian does address dialectic in an important chapter on a philosophizing hunting dog, but the narrative voice that questions the dog's intellect (tracking a scent is not the same thing as dealing in philosophical subtleties) turns out to be Aelian's sophisticated satire showing up the limitations of doctrinaire Stoicism. The *NA* also rejects the Stoic injunction against wonder. The Stoic master of physics (*ta phusika*) should approach natural phenomena with reason (*logos*), but the *NA* instead indulges in sheer wonderment at the world of animals. Approaching the nature of animals with wonder and ascribing their virtues to a divine mystery, Aelian restores to animals the possibility of participating in a rational *logos* that Stoicism itself is incapable of grasping.

CHAPTER 6

Animals, divinity, and myth

Divinity was important to Aelian, but it is difficult to speak with certainty about Aelian's religious thought. This difficulty has elicited contrasting responses from modern scholars. Wilamowitz-Möllendorff described Aelian's belief as being both childish and insistent.¹ Hübner however speaks of Aelian's "pure religiosity" ("echte Religiosität")² in contrast to what Erwin Rohde identified as merely "rhetorical piety" ("rhetorische Frömmigkeit").³ Though perhaps insistent, Aelian's religious thought is certainly not childish. And though it is also unquestionably sincere, that does not mean that it is untouched by rhetoric or that it is not treated without irony or even humor. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss in detail how Aelian represents divinity in the *NA*, specifically divinity's interaction with the world of animals. It will be seen that Aelian's depiction of cult in the *NA*, of religious practice from Spain to India, alternates from the pious to the merely curious. Then in the following sections, I deal with Aelian's problematization of myth-as-fiction and his simultaneous indulgence in *muthopoiësis*, or "storytelling." When Aelian allows himself to indulge in the elaboration of myth, the reader is witness to the writer's engagement with the divine at its most creative. Writing, or rather re-writing myth, Aelian mediates multiple narrative traditions about the gods and the divine and in turn defines his own religious truth.

Animals and divinity

By far the most common religious significance of animals in the *NA* is their status as creatures sacred to one or more gods or as creatures with special associative relationships with divinity.⁴ Thus we read frequent notices

¹ Wilamowitz-Möllendorff 1931–1932: 522. ² Hübner 1984: 167. ³ Rohde 1974: 473.

⁴ *NA* 1.1, 47, 48; 2.32, 35, 38; 4.4, 11, 29; 5.1, 39; 6.40; 7.2, 9, 13, 18, 35, 40, 41, 44; 8.27; 9.10, 51, 65; 10.14, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 45, 46, 47, 49; 11.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 16, 20, 31, 33, 35; 12.2, 4, 23, 30, 31, 36, 37, 42; 13.18, 26; 14.13, 18; 15.2, 23; 16.39; 17.1, 37, 46.

about what animals are sacred to Apollo (raven, swan, hawk, wolf, serpent, deer, bull), Isis (vulture, scorpion, gazelle, cow, asp, dog), Artemis (deer, partridge, goat, gazelle, hare), Hera (dogfish, vulture, serpent), or Aphrodite (cow, turtle dove, swallow). Some associations between animal and divinity are familiar, others less so. Thus Zeus is throughout the *NA* associated with the lion and eagle. But not everyone knows that the local god Adranos in Sicily has hounds in attendance at his temple there (*NA* 11.20).

A more specific association between animals and divinity is the role that certain animals play in cult, including their role as sacrificial victims. This is a favorite theme in the *NA*.⁵ In one chapter, Aelian displays his reverence for the role of oxen as sacrificial victims, how they ornament the altars of the gods and provide a feast for pious attendees of religious festivals (*NA* 2.57). Aelian's depiction of the mantic serpent attached to the temple of Juno at Lanuvium also offers insight into Aelian's complex relationship with Roman cultural identity (see [Chapter 4](#)). But perhaps the most beautiful description is Aelian's account of the choral performance of a flock of swans as they celebrate the rites of Hyperborean Apollo (11.1).

Much of Aelian's representation of animals in cult was of course informed by his scholarly research, but his firsthand experience of cult in Praeneste and in Rome must also have played its part in shaping the *NA*. I discuss Aelian's familiarity with the Egyptian cult of Isis in [Chapter 7](#), but consider also the lore associated with the Anagogia and Katagogia, festivals in honor of Aphrodite of Eryx in Sicily, when a flock of pigeons signified the departure and advent of the goddess from Libya (*NA* 4.2). Knowledge of the festivals could well have been familiar to Aelian from analogous celebrations at the temple of Aphrodite of Eryx on the Capitoline.⁶ The Romans captured Aphrodite's temple in Eryx in 249 BCE,⁷ and the cult, apparently retaining its strong Punic and Greek associations,⁸ was established in Rome in 217 BCE after the Roman defeat at Lake Trasimene.⁹ The cultural significance of the temple in Rome is attested by the fact that a connection with the original cult at Eryx was maintained into the Imperial period.¹⁰ Further, the position of the temple of Aphrodite of Eryx on the Capitoline is a sign of the cult's prominence in Roman religious and civic life. This background enriches our understanding of the religious dynamic in the *NA*, but we should avoid thinking that participation in cult was a

⁵ *NA* 2.57; 4.2; 10.16, 23, 50; 11.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 16, 20, 33, 40; 12.1, 23, 27, 31; 16.16, 39; 17.46.

⁶ See De Vido 1996. ⁷ Plb. 1.55; cf. D.S. 4.83.

⁸ Cic. *Div. Caec.* 55–56; Str. 6.2.6, 13.1.53; Verg. *A.* 5.759–760.

⁹ Liv. 22.9.10; 23.30.13; 23.31.9. ¹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 4.43.4; Suet. *Cl.* 25.5.

religious experience more “real” than encounters with the divine that were mediated through literature or even hearsay. That Aelian is generally silent about first-hand participation in cult (his role as high priest, for example) in no way detracts from the significance of divinity and the power of the divine that pervades the *NA*.

Animals also play a prominent role in religious etiological narratives in the *NA*.¹¹ We hear, for example, of the divine origins of certain species: Prometheus invented the goat (*NA* 1.53), while Egyptians believe that the *oxurhunkhos* fish was born from the wounds of Osiris, whom they associate with the Nile (10.46). The Nemean lion, says Aelian, fell from Selene at the bidding of Hera (12.7), and the bulls of Khaonia, in the north-western part of Greece, are said to be descendants of the oxen of Geryon (12.11). More frequently, narratives explaining the origins of animals entail metamorphosis of some kind. Thus, the mollusk known as the *nêritês* used to be a boy, the beloved of either Aphrodite or Poseidon (14.28, see [Chapter 8](#)). Similarly, Apollo turned the sailor Pompilos into the fish of that name (15.23); Hera transformed Gerana, the queen of the Pygmies, into a crane (*geranos*, 15.29); and in India a pious boy was transformed by Helios into the hoopoe (16.5, see [Chapter 7](#)). In one curious case, the phenomenon works in the opposite direction, as a divinity itself may have animal origins: Aelian narrates the tale of an Italian woodland god, bearing the face of a goat, that was born from the union of a she-goat and a Sybarite goatherd named Krathis (6.24).¹²

Etiological narratives in the *NA* also explain the divine causes of certain animal behaviors. Particularly intriguing is the story of the molting of the snake, said to be the result of a *pharmakon* for old age, awarded by Zeus to informants against Prometheus’ theft of fire; the *pharmakon* ends up as the property of the snake by a humorous twist involving a thirsty pack-ass and the snake’s guardianship of a freshwater spring. Aelian even provides literary precedents for the very ancient story, which, as we now know, can be traced back in its earliest form to the epic of Gilgamesh (*NA* 6.51). Further examples: frogs on the island of Seriphos make no noise because Perseus prayed to Zeus for their silence (3.37), and there are tame fish in the river Aborras (between the Tigris and Euphrates), where Hera is said to have bathed after her marriage to Zeus (12.27). Finally, the association with divinity explains the involvement of animals in certain cultural phenomena, such as the festival when the Romans honor geese

¹¹ *NA* 1.53; 3.37; 5.2, 14; 6.42, 51; 9.21; 10.21, 46; 12.7, 11, 27, 30, 36, 37; 14.28; 15.23, 29; 16.5.

¹² For more metamorphoses, see *NA* 1.1; 3.23; 4.43; 15.11, 23, 29; 16.5.

for their role in saving the temple of Jupiter (12.30, see [Chapter 4](#)) or the Mysian story of the Ophiogeneis, or “Snake-born” people, the offspring of the coupling of Halia, daughter of Sybaris, and a giant snake in the grove of Artemis in Phrygia (12.36).¹³

Given that so much of the *NA* focuses on the moral superiority of animals to humans, it is not surprising that such a prominent place in the work is given to the religious piety of animals, which by their example demonstrate to humans how to respect divinity.¹⁴ Not only are animals capable of recognizing sacrilege, as when a hawk once revealed a theft from the temple of Apollo at Delphi (*NA* 2.43), but they themselves actively take the initiative in worshipping the gods. I have already briefly mentioned the religious devotion of elephants towards Selene (4.11), but remarkable too is the notice that flies miraculously absent themselves from the Olympian games, crossing to the other bank of the Alpheios river and even refraining from the carcasses of the sacrificial offerings (5.17) all out of reverence for the god (αἰδοῖ τοῦ θεοῦ, 11.8).

It is also to be expected that Aelian would provide notices of animals that themselves receive worship as divinities from humans,¹⁵ a practice that became a part of the ethnographic literary tradition with Herodotus’ treatment of the religious culture of Egypt (see [Chapter 7](#)). Not all instances of animal worship in the *NA*, however, are Egyptian. After a lengthy series of notices concerning animal worship in Egypt, Aelian finally tells us that the inhabitants of Thebes in Greece worship a marten (*galê*), which was said to have been the nurse of Herakles or at least the catalyst of the hero’s birth when his mother Alkmene was in labor (*NA* 12.5). In the same notice we also learn that the inhabitants of Hamaxitos in the Troad worship mice, hence the origins of Sminthian Apollo. Elsewhere, Aelian even mentions the sacred eel that dwells in the river Arethusa (8.4). Aelian’s point in these notices is to counter Greek cultural condescension. If by worshipping animals the Egyptians become a source of ridicule for Greeks (γέλῳ τὰ ὀφλισκάνουσι, 12.5), then Aelian’s notices of animal worship among the Greeks reveal the Greeks themselves to be at least partially ridiculous according to their own cultural standards (see [Chapter 7](#)).

Finally, the relationship between divinity and animals may be described on the basis of sympathy or antipathy. Sympathetic relationships seem to be specific to the waxing and waning of the goddess Selene. The waning of the moon, for example, weakens shellfish and crustaceans (*NA* 9.6); when

¹³ Cf. Str. 13.1.14.

¹⁴ *NA* 2.43, 47; 3.23; 4.11, 43; 5.17; 6.41, 58; 7.10, 13, 25; 9.10; 12.2; 16.5, 16; 17.37, 46.

¹⁵ *NA* 8.4; 9.18; 10.16, 21, 23, 24, 28, 47; 11.10, 17, 39; 12.5, 7, 11; 14.27.

the moon is in eclipse, the ibis closes its eyes (10.29); puppies gain their eyesight with the appearance of the moon (10.45); and the *phusa* fish in Egypt grow and shrink according to the movement of Selene (12.13). More common is antipathy, as, for example, between Sarapis/Zeus and the ass (10.28) or between Artemis Rhokkaia and dogs (10.22, 14.20).¹⁶

The cast of gods, goddesses, and heroes within the pages of the *NA* is indeed diverse and varied. There is, however, a select group of divinities that receive Aelian's attention more than others. Those gods or goddesses with five or more references in the *NA* are (in descending order of frequency): Apollo (22), Zeus (14), Helios (10), Selene (9), Artemis (8), Hera (8), Poseidon (7), Aphrodite (6), Athena (6), Asklepios (5), Demeter (5), Isis (5), and Sarapis (5).¹⁷ Dionysus, Ares, and Hermes also appear in the *NA*, though less frequently.¹⁸ The frequent appearance of Isis and Sarapis should not come as a surprise, given Aelian's interest in all things Egyptian, and I discuss their overall significance to the *NA* in Chapter 7. For the moment, though, it is relevant to note that their prominence in the collection should be contextualized within the contemporary interest in Eastern cults of healing and salvation, to which the prominence of Asklepios may also be ascribed.¹⁹ Such cults were important not just to Aelian but also to the larger religious landscape of his world. At one point, Aelian tells the story of Asklepios' resurrection of a woman accidentally killed at the hands of his priests in Epidauros; it is one of the most vivid and frightening episodes in the entire collection (*NA* 9.33). In that narrative, Aelian even appeals to Asklepios directly as "king and most devoted of all gods to humankind" (βασιλεῦ καὶ θεῶν φιλανθρωπότατε, *NA* 9.33, p. 221, line 12), devotional language suggesting perhaps that Aelian even had some special relationship to the god of healing.

More noteworthy, though, is the prominence of Helios in the collection. The ten appearances of the god that I have tabulated (third only to Apollo

¹⁶ *NA* 9.33; 10.16, 28; 11.6, 7; 11.32; 12.22; 14.20, 28; 15.11, 29.

¹⁷ Apollo: *NA* 1.47, 48; 2.32, 43; 7.9, 18; 10.14, 26, 40, 49; 11.1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 40; 12.1, 4, 5, 37; 14.13; 15.23. Zeus: *NA* 2.47, 3.37, 5.2, 14, 17; 6.51; 7.10; 9.10; 10.28; 11.33, 40; 12.27, 30; 17.47. Helios: *NA* 5.39; 6.58; 7.40; 10.16, 26, 28; 11.11; 12.7; 14.27, 28. Selene: *NA* 2.35, 38; 4.11; 9.6; 10.16, 45; 11.11; 12.7, 13. Artemis: *NA* 7.35; 10.35; 11.9; 12.4, 22, 31, 36; 14.20. Hera: *NA* 9.65; 10.22; 11.16; 12.4, 7, 27, 37; 15.29. Poseidon: *NA* 12.42; 14.18, 28; 15.2, 6, 23; 17.1. Aphrodite: *NA* 4.2; 10.27, 33, 34, 50; 14.28. Athena: *NA* 6.57; 10.37; 11.5; 12.4, 31; 14.18. Asklepios: 7.13; 8.11; 9.33; 10.49; 16.39. Demeter: *NA* 9.51, 65; 10.16, 33; 11.4. Isis: *NA* 10.22, 23, 27, 31, 45. Sarapis: *NA* 10.28; 11.31, 32, 34, 35.

¹⁸ Ares: 12.31, 15.11. Dionysus: 7.25, 7.44, 11.19, 12.31. Hermes: 10.29, 11.10, 12.4.

¹⁹ Kindstrand 1998: 2989. Cf. Aristid. *Or.* 49.46 Keil (*Sacred Tales* 3.46 Behr), where Isis, Sarapis, and Asklepios appear together in one of Aristides' visions. On the conflation of Sarapis and Asklepios, see Alvar Ezquerro 2008: 318–336. For the representation of Asklepios in Aelian's lost works, see frs. 98–101 Hercher, 101–104 Domingo-Forasté.

and Zeus) is actually a conservative number, for Aelian emphasizes the power of the sun throughout the *NA* without necessarily employing the god's proper name. It is safe to say that the divine, generative power of the sun permeates Aelian's meditations on the world of animals. This must be due at least in part to the contemporary popularity of Sol/Helios at Rome brought about by Julia Domna's connection to the solar cult of Elagabal in her native Emesa. Though the god's solar quality was well established by the third century CE, he was not originally a sun god. The Semitic name of the deity 'LH'GBL (*Elahagabal*) contains the words for "god" ('LH') and "mountain" or "creator," from the verb "to form" (GBL). The god's association with the sun may have come about in earlier times through the family name of the Emesene dynasts, Sampsigeramus, the first element of which alludes to the sun in the Semitic languages (cf. Akkadian *šamaš*, Hebrew *šemeš*, Arabic *šams*, and Syriac *šemšā*), or through the perceived similarity of the first part of the god's name 'LH' (*Elaha*) to the Greek word for sun (*hēlios*).²⁰ In any case, for Aelian and other Romans of the early third century CE, Elagabal was unquestionably a solar deity, and his connection to the Severi through Julia Domna sparked renewed interest in the sun god generally. Sol/Helios had been associated with earlier emperors (notably Augustus, Nero, and Commodus), which created for the Severi a sense of religious continuity with Rome's past sovereigns.²¹ The prominence of the sun god in Rome reached its apex of course during the reign of Caracalla's successor, Varius Avitus, grand-nephew of Julia Domna and heir to her family's ancestral priesthood of Elagabal at Emesa. Elagabalus, as he came to be known, installed his native deity's conical black stone with all pomp and circumstance in Rome and even came to self-identify with the god. But the Syrian god was worshipped in Rome before Elagabalus came to power, as Septimius Severus and Caracalla established his cult in the Syrian temple in Trastevere with Julius Balbillus as his priest.²² The emperor Elagabalus' downfall was due in part to his transgressive religious innovation when he insisted that his own godhead be worshipped exclusively in Rome and decreed that all other gods – even Jupiter Optimus Maximus of the Capitol – were subordinate to his own divinity.²³ Though his obsession with the sun god had disastrous consequences for the emperor Elagabalus,

²⁰ See Hitti 1951: 308 n. 1; Altheim and Stiehl 1966: 127–129; Starcky 1975–1976; Millar 1987: 129; Frey 1989: 45–46; Millar 1993: 301–305; Birley 1999: 71–72; Swain 1999: 182 n. 1; Butcher 2003; Levick 2007: 14–15; and Whitmarsh 2011: 109–110.

²¹ Levick 2007: 126. ²² Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010: 157; see also *LTUR* 5.83.

²³ See Frey 1989 and Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010. Morgan 2009 recognizes two factions among adherents to the cult of Emesa: fundamentalists such as Elagabalus and moderates like Julia Domna who sought to incorporate the ancestral deity within the larger religious culture of the empire.

Sol/Helios would nevertheless remain an important deity in Rome through the third century, his popularity culminating in Aurelian's massive, opulent temple to Sol, dedicated in 274. Even in the fourth century Helios retains his ties to imperial power: before his adoption of Christianity, Constantine was a devotee of the sun god, and Helios was central to the religious thought of the Emperor Julian. Despite the political antipathy that Aelian harbored against Elagabalus and articulated in his *Indictment of the Little Woman*, the *NA* offers abundant evidence of his own reverence, typical of the age, for the transcendent, divine power of the sun.

Myth

Relevant to the varied representation of the divine in the *NA* is Aelian's engagement with myth and mythmaking. It is tempting, given the notice in the *Souda* that Aelian held a position as high priest, to consider the *NA* as the work of a high priest and therefore to read the text as a sincere expression of Aelian's religious piety. But this biographically based approach is too speculative; the *NA* nowhere explicitly discusses the author's role as high priest, and without the notice in the *Souda* we would have no evidence whatsoever concerning Aelian's real-life activities as a priest. What we do have is an extravagant literary depiction of divinity, hence my focus in this chapter on myth, or divinity insofar as it is mediated through literary narrative.

I want to stress at the outset that a *literary* approach to understanding religious thought in the *NA* should not be construed as a concession to traditional criticisms, cited by Denis Feeney, that Roman *muthopoiësis* was deficient for its artificiality, that it was "derivative and parasitic, a borrowing from a more creative foreign culture in order to make up for something naturally missing."²⁴ Aelian could from this traditional point of view be considered as representative of the worst in Roman mythmaking: the writer from Praeneste was a mere compiler, with not a whit of originality, illustrative of how far the religious culture of Imperial Rome was from the putatively natural, communal font of myth that characterized the Greek Classical period. Even a scholar generally appreciative of Aelian's literary art such as Kindstrand tends to judge Aelian based upon this originary model. Surveying Aelian's *Nachleben* and frustrated by the lack of explicit citations to him in later authors, Kindstrand finds fault first and foremost with Aelian himself, "da, wie wir schon sahen, Aelian keineswegs originell

²⁴ Feeney 1998: 47.

ist.”²⁵ Though I am sympathetic to the difficulties for *Quellenforschung* posed by Aelian and his apparent imitators, I strenuously disagree with the interpretation that Aelian is wholly derivative and lacking in originality. We fail to understand Aelian fully if we think of him as a mere compiler, entirely passive and receptive of the literary tradition that preceded him. Consider the *spoudê* (zeal, energy, labor, *studium*) with which he characterizes his work as a whole. The *NA* is, if anything, an elaborate display of the meaningful recombination and transformation of material from seemingly disparate cultural traditions. Consequently, the originary model of myth criticized by Feeney is equally inadequate in accounting for the culturally varied myths with which Aelian populates the *NA*. We do Aelian a discredit, in other words, if we judge him solely on the basis of his accidentally being born too late and at too great a distance from a falsely imagined golden age of Greek mythical thinking. Aelian even pleads with his readers explicitly not to let his allotted place in history detract from his praise (*NA* pr., line 22).

Moreover, the slippery, shifting Aelian that emerges from his surviving texts – Greek? Roman? Slave? Citizen? Elite insider? Intellectual renegade? – has perhaps more in common with those of the fertile “contact zone” of the third century BCE, the “first interstitial generations” of Roman writers who appeared in the wake of the wars between Carthage and Rome.²⁶ It is, I suggest, more productive to bear in mind Aelian’s intellectual similarity to men like Naevius, Ennius, Plautus, Statius Caecilius, and Terence, “tri-lingual *semigraeci*” who “explored the crevices between the competing cultures of central and southern Italy.”²⁷ Like those writers, Aelian embraces the interpenetration of different cultural and religious traditions and has more of the “mobile sensibility” described by Niall Slater, according to which, “One understands the thought of another not as a perception of truth but rather as an ideological, therefore constructed, therefore manipulable system.”²⁸ Myth for Aelian, then, was not the slavish copying down of an alien tradition, but a creative act of manipulation and assimilation.

Just as, in the previous chapter, I rejected the notion that the *NA* represents a single, unified philosophical doctrine and favored a reading of the collection as philosophically experimental, exploring, and improvisatory, so here I reject the notion that myths in the *NA* represent a unified, dogmatic religious attitude. On the contrary, the religious outlook of any single chapter in the *NA* must be considered first within its immediate

²⁵ Kindstrand 1998: 2991.

²⁶ Feeney 1998: 67.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Slater 1993: 120.

context. As has been seen so far, in any interpretative approach to the *NA* one finds consistencies but also certain contradictions from fragment to fragment, and it must be conceded that Aelian's religious attitude too is mutable and shifting depending on its context. If we are to make sense at all of the religious meaning in the text, then that meaning will only arise through a dialogic interchange among the various religious positions within the text. As Feeney writes, "Meaning is produced by dialogue at every level, and the search for a single, monolithic meaning-system can only proceed at the expense of smothering this ubiquitous dialogic activity."²⁹ Furthermore, the very structure of this particular text militates against the idea that religious meaning will be univocal and stable. In fact, as I argue here and in the following chapter, the ambiguity and indeterminacy regarding the divine in the *NA* arises from the historical background in which Aelian was writing, when the role of culturally specific religious phenomena (Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Indian, Syrian) was being redefined and renegotiated by intellectuals and writers from across the empire.

Despite the significant amount of apparently fabulous narratives in the *NA*, myth nevertheless seems to be a source of anxiety for Aelian.³⁰ Myth, after all, was traditionally conceived as being in opposition to truth, and in the putative debate between truth and fiction, truth of course nearly always gets the upper hand. But the following examples clearly indicate that for Aelian "truth" is judged according to different criteria in different contexts:

1. In the lengthy discourse on performing elephants that I discussed in [Chapter 4](#), Aelian declares that the Roman setting, as opposed to some alternative exotic setting, is what validates his story (*NA* 2.11, p. 33, lines 9–14). But this statement also implies that merely by a shift of geographic setting truth may be suddenly redefined as myth. Truth is therefore not an objective "reality" but a contingent and relative evaluation.
2. Regarding the metamorphosis of aging storks into human form, a reward for their filial piety, Aelian assesses the reliability of his source, Alexander of Mundos: "And I don't think it's a myth. Or else why would Alexander even want to tell such marvels when he had nothing to gain? And besides, it would not even be suitable for a man of understanding to fashion a lie instead of the truth, not even for the greatest profit, not at all at any rate for one who is about to succumb

²⁹ Feeney 1998: 21, following Kramer 1989: 114.

³⁰ Kindstrand 1976: 37.

to an opponent's grips that are most unprofitable for such lies" (καὶ οὐ μοι δοκεῖ μῦθος εἶναι. ἢ τί καὶ βουλόμενος ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος τοῦτο ἂν ἑτεραπεύσατο κερδαίνων μηδέν; ἄλλως τε οὐδ' ἂν ἔπρεπεν ἀνδρὶ συνετῷ πρὸ τῆς ἀληθείας ποιήσασθαι τὸ ψεῦδος, οὐδὲ ἐπὶ κέρδει τῷ μεγίστῳ, μή τι γοῦν εἰς λαβὰς ἐμπεσουμένῳ τὰς ὑπὲρ τῶν τοιούτων ἀκερδεστάτας, *NA* 3.23, p. 64, lines 10–15). Here, what guarantees the truth of the story for Aelian is the disinterestedness of his source: Alexander of Mundos has nothing to gain from fabricating the story. For that reason it is completely plausible that aging storks assume human form on the islands of Ocean.

3. Confronting the disbelief of his critics concerning the naturally respectful behavior of elephants toward their elders, Aelian writes, "But perhaps I seem to be telling a myth, gentlemen, to you who are artificers (if I should wish to speak the truth) and fabricators of myths and the unbelievable" (*NA* 6.61, p. 158, lines 8–10). In this context, only those who do not deal in lies will recognize the truth of Aelian's narrative. Mythmaking is here characterized as unethical. The reader's suspicion about the truth-value of the story automatically impugns his or her own relationship to the truth.
4. When discussing the immortality of the ibis, Aelian writes, "I too have said that it is the creature with the longest life. But Apion says that the ibis is immortal and he provides as witnesses the priests at Hermopolis who have shown it to him. Even to him this seems far from the truth, and to me it would seem to be completely false" (*NA* 10.29, p. 247, lines 15–18). In this fascinating passage, Aelian follows the example of his source, Apion, who in one clause freely perpetuates the myth of the immortality of the ibis (λέγει δὲ Ἀπίων), even offering the authoritative evidence of the priests. In the next clause, however, Apion suddenly redraws the boundaries between what is true and false (τοῦτο μὲν οὖν καὶ ἐκείνῳ δοκεῖ τῆς ἀληθείας ἀφεστάναι πάμπολυ), thereby distancing himself from the Egyptian priests, whose authority was formerly presumed but now invalidated. Aelian unquestioningly sides with Apion.
5. After a lengthy discourse on the Egyptian worship of the Apis bull, Aelian introduces an explanation that the cult resulted from the religious manipulations of king Menis: "But the sort of things that Egyptians who write about animals turn into a mythology (μυθολογίαν) about this creature – I don't think that these sorts of things are welcome in this, the true property of animals (τῇδε τῇ περὶ τῶν ζώων

ἀληθεία καὶ ιδιότητι)” (*NA* 11.10, p. 264, lines 6–8).³¹ In a surprising reversal, Aelian therefore rejects as inappropriate mythology the *rationalizing* account concerning king Menis. The elaborate rites and beliefs concerning the Apis bull are, by contrast, aligned with the literary truth of Aelian’s text.

6. Finally, reasserting his own authorial reliability, Aelian writes in the epilogue to the *NA* that, “I myself was unable to form creatures other than what are, but I have shown that I have become familiar with many creatures. And yet I said some things of which no one else spoke, who at any rate has attempted this. But the truth is dear to me, both elsewhere and here not least of all” (*NA* ep., p. 432, lines 5–8). Aelian’s meaning is opaque: he has not invented any of the animals that he has discussed, but he has also offered things that his peers have not. Lest the reader think, however, that by this statement Aelian has implied that he has fabricated any of his material, he holds up like a talisman the now familiar claim that truth is dear to him (φιλη δὲ ἡ ἀλήθεια μοι), reassuring his critics that he is operating within an established system of truth.

Myth, understood as fictitious storytelling, would, therefore, seem to have no place in the *NA*.³² Yet the frequent incorporation of myth into the *NA* cannot be denied: Aelian may apologize for expounding upon the mythological origins of Sminthian Apollo, but he also concedes that “we are not worse off for listening to this too” (χείρους δὲ αὐτῶν οὐ γεγόναμεν καὶ τοιαῦτα προσακούσαντες, *NA* 12.5, p. 283, lines 3–4), and in the lengthy discourse on the shellfish known as the *nêritês*, Aelian concedes further that, “to tell a few short myths in the midst of a lengthy collection is merely to relieve the listening and to inject some pleasure into the discourse” (καὶ μέντοι καὶ διαμυθολογήσαι μικρὰ ἄττα ἐν μακρᾷ τῇ συγγραφῇ οὐδὲν ἄλλ’ ἢ διαναπαῦσαι τε τὴν ἀκοὴν καὶ ἐφηδῦναι τὸν λόγον, 14.28, p. 354, lines 2–3). The evaluation of myth as a literary mode that is somehow unserious and therefore juvenile, geared more toward pleasure than elevated intellectual pursuits, and outside of the established program of truth is echoed in the contemporary rhetorical textbooks. Myth

³¹ A difficult passage. Hercher deleted altogether the phrase τῇδε τῇ περὶ τῶν ζώων ἀληθεία καὶ ιδιότητι, but GLR are surely right to restore it to the text, as it is attested in all the surviving manuscripts, with only slight variation. I take the phrase as dependent on φιλα in the main clause. The significant hyperbaton separating this phrase from the main clause, as well as separating the nominative phrase οἱ τὰ περὶ τῶν ζώων γράψαντες from the preceding subordinate clause to which it clearly belongs, seems to have been part of Aelian’s rhetorical patterning of the sentence.

³² On the negative attitude toward myth in the *NA*, see Kindstrand 1976: 36–38.

is, according to the *Progumnasmata* attributed to Hermogenes (second century CE),³³ a suitable entrée to rhetorical training for young students, “because it can order their souls for the better,” but it is interesting to note here that it was considered completely appropriate for a myth to be false (ψευδῆ), so long as it was useful (χρήσιμον) for some part of life (I.I–2). If myth is a suitable pedagogic medium for the young, then it is assumed that more mature intellectuals would look down on myth as childish. Against this background, Aelian’s defensiveness seems understandable.

Helpful in making sense of Aelian’s varied strategies of truth and his changing, contradictory attitudes toward myth is the theoretical model advanced by Paul Veyne, who reminds us forcefully that truth itself is socially constructed. “[I]t is we,” Veyne writes, “who fabricate our truths, and it is not ‘reality’ that makes us believe. For ‘reality’ is the child of the constitutive imagination of our tribe. If it were otherwise, the quasi-totality of universal culture would be inexplicable – mythologies, doctrines, pharmacopoeias, false and spurious sentences.”³⁴ Given that Aelian is himself very much interested in representing the “quasi-totality of universal culture,” at least as far as it concerns animal lore, it is to be expected that the *NA* would appeal to various systems of truth. One of the merits of this protean text is precisely its rejection of a single, overarching “master discourse”³⁵ and its embrace of multiple ways of conceiving what is true, acceptable, and believable. Looked at in this way, there is ample room for creativity and inventiveness in the *NA*, and Aelian must simply avoid appearing as a forger too obviously fraudulent in his creativity. Veyne’s piscine metaphor is apt: “A forger is a fish who, for reasons of temperament, has ended up in the wrong bowl. His scientific imagination follows myths no longer found on the program.”³⁶ Aelian, it is safe to say, whatever fabrications he has allowed himself, strove to swim in the same bowl as his sophistic peers in Rome; he wanted the *NA* to be read and appreciated as a serious work of art.

I therefore understand Aelian’s *muthopoiêsis* in the *NA* as the plausible assimilation and transformation of traditional material as a means of creating narratives about divinity that are meaningful in Severan Rome and relevant to that historical context. To show specifically how Aelian’s *muthopoiêsis* engages with the contemporary discourse on divinity in ways that are subtle and sophisticated, I turn now to an analysis of two elaborate narratives from the *NA*: the tale of Herakleïs and the stork and the tale of Pindos and the snake.

³³ Kennedy 2003: 73–88.

³⁴ Veyne 1988: 113.

³⁵ Feeney 1998: 45.

³⁶ Veyne 1988: 108.

The widow of Tarentum

This story begins in a straightforward manner, as Aelian declares that his theme will be that animals are able to remember a favor (*kharis*). He then launches into his story, but without any reference to sources – in fact the whole of the narrative is told as if from Aelian's own imagination, without a single “they say” and without any appeal to the authority of some prior *logos*:

ἐν Τάραντι γίνεται γυνή τά τε ἄλλα σπουδῆς ἀξία καὶ οὖν καὶ σώφρων πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα· Ἡρακλῆϊς ὄνομα αὐτῇ. περιεῖπε μὲν οὖν ζῶντα τὸν γεγαμηκότα εὖ μάλα κηδεμονικῶς· ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸν βίον οὗτος κατέστρεψε, τὰς ἀστικὰς ἢ προειρημένη γυνή μισεῖ διατριβάς καὶ τὴν οἰκίαν, ἐν ᾗ τὸν ἄνδρα νεκρὸν θεάσατο, καὶ ὡς εἶχε λύπης ἐς τοὺς τάφους μετοικίζεται, καὶ τοῖς ἡρίοις τοῦ ποτε ἀνδρός τλημόνως παρέμεινε, πιστὴν ἑαυτὴν καὶ σώφρονα τῷ κατὰ γῆς ὄντι ἀποφαίνουσα. (*NA* 8.21, p. 203, line 24–p. 204, line 2)

In Tarentum there was a wife who was both in other ways worthy of attention and especially virtuous regarding her husband. Her name was Herakleïs. She used to treat the man who married her, when he was alive, with the utmost care. But when he died, the aforementioned wife began to hate her life in town and the house in which she beheld her husband as a corpse, and since she was full of grief, she moved into his tomb, and she remained steadfastly at the grave of her one-time husband, showing herself loyal and virtuous to the one beneath the earth.

Aelian's introduction obviously evokes the introduction of Eumolpus' tale of the Widow of Ephesus from Petronius' *Satyricon*:

matrona quaedam Ephesi tam notae erat pudicitiae, ut vicinarum quoque gentium feminas ad spectaculum sui evocaret. haec ergo cum virum extulisset, non contenta vulgari more funus passis prosequi crinibus aut nudatum pectus in conspectu frequentiae plangere, in conditorium etiam prosecuta est defunctum, positumque in hypogaeo Graeco more corpus custodire ac flere totis noctibus diebusque coepit . . . una igitur in tota civitate fabula erat, solum illud affulsisse verum pudicitiae amorisque exemplum omnis ordinis homines confitebantur. (*Petr.* III.1–5)

A certain wife in Ephesus was so famously virtuous, that she drew the women even of neighboring populations to look upon her. This woman therefore, when she brought out her husband for burial, not content to follow the funeral procession in the common manner with her hair undone or beating her naked breast in view of the crowd, followed the dead man even into the tomb, and she began to watch over the body, placed in the earth in the Greek manner, and to weep day and night . . . Thus there was just one story

in the whole city: men of every rank were confessing that that alone blazed forth as the true example of virtue and love.

It is well known that Petronius himself may have borrowed the tale from a now lost Greek literary source or from the folkloric tradition.³⁷ There are, however, significant clues in Aelian's narrative that point directly to Petronius' text. Apart from the obvious similarity between several of the details in each version, even one noteworthy difference in Aelian turns out in fact to be a sophisticated allusion to the *Satyricon*. Aelian has transferred the setting of his story from Ephesus to Tarentum, a shift that subtly highlights the original narrative setting of the Petronian tale: Eumolpus tells the story to his fellow travelers aboard a ship bound for Tarentum.³⁸ But whereas the Petronian tale goes on to illustrate "the inconstancy of women . . . how easily they fall in love, how quickly they forget even their children, that there is no woman so chaste that she might not be driven to madness by lust for a stranger" (*muliebrem levitatem . . . quam facile adamarent, quam cito etiam filiorum obliviscerentur, nullamque esse feminam tam pudicam, quae non peregrina libidine usque ad furorem averteretur*, 110.7), Aelian's tale deviates significantly from its source material.

It happened to be summer, the season when young storks were making their first attempt at flight. One stork, however, was still not strong enough for flight and fell from the sky, injuring his legs. Noticing the stork's fall, the faithful widow went to its assistance and proceeded to tend to its legs and gradually to nourish it back to health. Over time it grew strong enough for her to release it, and the stork "by some natural and wondrous act of thought" (ἐννοίᾳ τινὶ φυσικῇ καὶ θαυμαστῇ, *NA* 8.21, p. 204, line 11) knew that it was indebted to the widow.

The following year, we find the widow "warming herself in the sun, when spring was beginning to shine" (ἥρος ὑπολάμποντος ἐν ἡλίῳ θερομένη, *NA* 8.21, p. 204, line 13), when the same stork suddenly reappears, opens its beak wide, vomits forth a stone into Herakleïs' lap, and flies away to rest atop the widow's roof. Herakleïs is at first startled and confused, but she then deposits the strange stone inside her house. That night, however, she is roused from sleep and "she saw a beam of light and a radiance shooting forth, and the house was lit up as if a torch had been brought in; so intense indeed was the light that was emanating and that was produced from the nugget, and it was greatly revered" (ὁρᾷ αὐγὴν τινὰ καὶ αἴγλην

³⁷ The story is also told by Phaedrus, *Fabularum Appendix* 15. On Greek antecedents, see Walsh 1970: 11 and Huber-Rebenich 1990.

³⁸ Petr. 100.7.

ἀφιῆσαν, καὶ κατελάμπετο ὁ οἶκος ὡς ἔσκομισθείσης δαδός· τοσοῦτον ἄρα ἐκ τῆς βώλου τὸ σέλας ἀνῆι τε καὶ ἐτίκτετο καὶ μέγα τίμιος, lines 20–22). Grabbing hold of the stork (which apparently had never left the woman's roof), she recognized the scar and knew that this was the very creature that she had nursed. At this point, Aelian's tale ends abruptly.

The story of Herakleïs turns out to be very different from Petronius' story of the widow of Ephesus, despite their parallel beginnings, as Aelian's narrative rejects the Petronian parody of feminine virtue and instead idealizes the reciprocity of *kharis* between Herakleïs and the stork. I suggest further that the distinctly more solemn, moralizing tone of Aelian's narrative is achieved through a series of details that are either explicitly or implicitly associated with divinity. First, and most obviously, the protagonist of Aelian's narrative is named after Herakles, the divine son of Zeus and, according to one legend, the founder of Tarentum, the heroine's native city.³⁹ Second, and more subtly, there are several references to the sun god Helios, newly relevant in the Severan age because of Julia Domna's connection to the solar cult of Elagabal at Emesa (see above). Not only does Aelian offer an image of Herakleïs warming herself in the heat of the springtime sun, but the light radiating from the mysterious stone at night is described in terms that regularly denote the light of the sun (αὐγὴν, αἴγλην, *NA* 8.21, p. 204, line 20). Aelian's narrative is suffused with the heavenly power of Helios.

Thirdly, the luminous stone itself connotes divinity. Though Aelian does not name the type of stone, it must be *lukhnis* or *lukhnitēs*,⁴⁰ and it is clear that Aelian is blending two traditions: (a) the stone's association with the cult statue of Atargatis in the Syrian city of Hierapolis Bambuke and (b) the stone's association with the stork. Describing the cult statue of Atargatis, or Assyrian Hera, Lucian writes, "She bears a stone in her head; it is called *lukhnis*, and its name arises from what it does. For out of this at night abundant light shines, and from it the whole temple too glows as if from lamps" (λίθον ἐπὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ φορεῖ· λυχνὶς καλεῖται, οὖνομα δὲ οἱ τοῦ ἔργου ἢ συντυχίη. ἀπὸ τούτου ἐν νυκτὶ σέλας πολλὸν ἀπολάμπεται, ὑπὸ δὲ οἱ καὶ ὁ νηὸς ἅπας οἶον ὑπὸ λύχνοισι φαίνεται, *Luc. Syr.D.* 32).⁴¹ The similarities with Aelian's description of the stone are clear enough, but that Aelian was familiar with Lucian's work is corroborated by a further passage in the *NA*, describing the sacred fish in the sanctuary at Hierapolis (*NA* 12.2=*Luc. Syr.D.* 45). Philostratus, in the *Life of Apollonios*

³⁹ Verg. *A.* 3.551. ⁴⁰ King 1865: 237–238.

⁴¹ On the *lukhnis* in Lucian's text, see Lightfoot 2003: 444–445.

of *Tyana*, preserves the second tradition associated with the stone: in a passage discussing the instinctive care that animals have for their young, Apollonios cites the practice of storks, who embed the *lukhnitês* (λυχνίτης) stone into their nests to protect their young from snakes (*VA* 2.14). Aelian therefore depicts the stork bestowing a gift that would be appropriate for it to possess, but that would also express the divine power of the Syrian goddess.⁴²

Aelian's narrative manipulates Petronius' short story by redirecting it away from sexual impropriety and the appetites of the body and transforming it instead into a chaste tale permeated with the mysterious power of the divine. The fact that divinity is here conveyed through the agency of the stork is consistent with Aelian's overall appreciation of the religious significance of animals. Whereas Petronius' widow of Ephesus yields to her physical hunger for food and to her sexual desire for the soldier (*Petr.* III.12–112.2), Aelian's widow of Tarentum shifts her focus away from her dead husband only out of concern for the wounded stork and she is depicted as receiving nourishment only from the immaterial light of the sun. In other words, Aelian's narrative represents a resublimation of the constellation of themes (death, the tomb, rejuvenation, sex, food and drink) that Petronius had earlier parodied and brought down to the level of real life.⁴³ Aelian corroborates Bakhtin's characterization of these same themes (a "folkloric complex" prior to novelistic discourse) as taking on mystical form in the cults from the East during the Hellenistic period:

In the cultic redaction all elements of the complex appear not in a real but in a sublimated form, and are linked with one another not via a real-life narrative, but through mystic-symbolic links and interrelationships, and the triumph of life over death (resurrection) is accomplished not on a real and earthly plane but on a mystical one. What is more, there is a complete absence of laughter, and copulation has been sublimated almost beyond recognition.⁴⁴

Aelian's artistic representation, however, opens up the possibility for subtle ambiguities. If we accept Bakhtin's assertion that in the cultic narrative explicit sexuality is "sublimated almost beyond recognition," then it is

⁴² Aelian's scene of the house suddenly and miraculously illuminated in the dead of night is echoed in a much later Greek text, the Byzantine epic *Digenes Akrites*, where it is described explicitly as a Syrian religious miracle: Εἶδες θαῦμα παράδοξον πῶς, τῆς νυκτὸς παρούσης | καὶ φωτὸς μὴ ὑπάρχοντος, φέγγος ἦλθεν ἐξ ὕψους | καὶ ἀπορρήτως ἔπλησε φωτὸς τὸν ὅλον οἶκον; (3.141–143 in the Grottaferrata version).

⁴³ Auerbach 1953: 24–49; Sullivan 1968; Bakhtin 1981: 221–223; Conte 1996: 104–139; and McGlathery 2001: 119–140. This reading is problematized by Rimell 2002: 123–139.

⁴⁴ Bakhtin 1981: 223.

worth noting that sexuality *per se* is not absolutely eradicated. We should remember that, for as much as Petronius' tale of the widow of Ephesus depicts a fictional world in which the prerogative of the woman is in the ascendant,⁴⁵ it is narrated as a *negative* example of female behavior, prompting a blush from its female audient and the indignant response of her husband (Petr. 113.1). Aelian's widow, by contrast, retains her *sôphrosynê*, not just for her elaborate grief over the death of her husband, but also for the *kharis* that she shows the injured stork. But beneath Herakleïs' evident chastity and decency, there simmer the same desires of the female body that Petronius exploited to invite patriarchal scorn. Aelian's story points to the ways in which those desires were positively incorporated by an alternative symbolic system and it attempts to assimilate that system to a familiar Greco-Roman narrative.

If the luminous stone that was dropped into Herakleïs' lap evokes the cult statue of Assyrian Hera, then it also evokes the other sensuous details of the goddess' sanctuary that Lucian describes in the *De dea Syria*. We hear of the unbridled sexual desire between women and eunuchs (Luc. *Syr.D.* 22), the giant *phalloi* of Dionysus (28), not to mention the intense erotic passions of the Assyrian queen Stratonike, who founded the temple and whose story is the narrative centerpiece of Lucian's essay (17–27). Of course these overtly sexual elements are only obliquely hinted at in Aelian's allusive myth. But they are there nonetheless, sublimated into the realm of religious symbolism. Thus, when we witness Herakleïs warming herself in the sun (ἐν ἡλίῳ θερομένη, *NA* 8.21, p. 204, line 13), the sensuousness of that act is hardly transgressive, though the mischievous reader might wonder why this exemplary widow of Tarentum never moved back into the tomb with her husband's corpse, and why she has resumed residence in the house that she formerly hated (οἶκος, line 21). But Aelian's mysterious narrative neutralizes such suspicions. In this sophisticated Italian myth that assimilates Syrian religious imagery, the satisfaction of bodily desires is stylized in ways that are sanctioned by divinity.

Pindos and the snake

The tale of Pindos, one of the longest narratives in the *NA*, is concerned with a theme that was broadly relevant to Roman religious thinking during the Imperial period, namely the permeability of the boundary between mortal and divine. As with the tale of Herakleïs, Aelian does not cite any

⁴⁵ Doody 1996: 112.

literary sources. We learn that Pindos is the grandson of the Emathian king Lukaon, and the son of Makedon, who would one day give his name to the Macedonians. Pindos was a beautiful young man who inspired the envy and hatred of his brothers, and their conspiring against him led him to become a refugee living in the countryside. One day while hunting, he pursued a herd of fawns into a cave but was prevented from hunting them by a mysterious voice that warned him not to touch the creatures. The next day, Pindos returned to the site, not entering the cave, but curious about the mysterious voice, and he encountered a giant snake. He offered the snake some of the birds that he had with him, which the snake accepted, and thereafter Pindos would repeat this ritual, offering up to the creature the first fruits of his hunt. Pindos in turn became famous for his hunting, attracting the attention not just of the local men and women, but also of his envious brothers. Catching him alone by a river, his brothers ambush and kill him, but the giant snake, hearing the cries of his friend, attacks the brothers and avenges Pindos' murder. The snake guards the corpse for a time, but when it realizes that its presence frightens the locals, it retreats, allowing the people to tend to Pindos' body and provide him burial. Aelian concludes the story by noting that the river took its name from the boy who was buried beside it.

Like the story of Herakleis and the stork, the tale of Pindos and the snake is about the reciprocal *kharis* exhibited by members of different species, and also like the earlier story, it is suffused with the presence of the divine.⁴⁶ Throughout the narrative, Aelian probes human engagement with divinity, focusing provocatively on the boundary that supposedly separates the two. Several passages establish this thematic background. First, Aelian begins the story by sketching Pindos' mythological genealogy, reaching back two generations to Pindos' grandfather: "Lukaon, the king of Emathia, had a child" (Λυκάονι τῷ βασιλεῖ τῆς Ἠμαθίας γίνεται παῖς, *NA* 10.48, p. 254, line 8). Making Lukaon the first word in the story is thematically motivated. The mythographer Hyginus reminds us that when Zeus once came as a guest to Lukaon's home, "Lukaon's sons wanted to test if Zeus was a god" (*Lycaonis filii Iouem tentare uoluerunt, deusne esset*, Hyg. *Fab.* 176). They therefore prepared a meal of human flesh, but when Zeus realized what was placed before him, he killed Lukaon's sons and transformed Lukaon himself into a wolf. Ovid's version of the story eliminates the role of Lukaon's sons and makes Lukaon himself Jupiter's daring antagonist. Ovid even relates the story to Roman imperial politics:

⁴⁶ See Ogden 2013: 282, 334.

when the gods hear of Jupiter's anger at the human race and Lukaon's transgression, they shout in support with all the mad enthusiasm of a political faction: "no less pleasing to you, Augustus, was the pious fidelity of your people than was that of the gods to Jupiter" (Ov. *Met.* 1.204–205). Ovid's comparison here of Augustus with Jupiter situates the story of Lukaon within the poet's larger exploration of Augustus' own godlike status as *princeps*. Aelian probably knew Ovid's poem. By beginning the story with Lukaon, a figure from myth who evokes animal metamorphosis, Aelian ties the following narrative to the theriomorphic interests of the *NA* generally. But the tradition about the ambiguous status of Zeus' divinity (is he or isn't he?) and Lukaon's transgressive testing of that divinity were themes both relevant to the Roman imperial cult and suggestively explored by Aelian in the story of Pindos.

Towards the climax of Aelian's story, when Pindos has become a celebrity for his successful exploits as a hunter, he attracts the erotic attention of the local women:

καὶ ἐφοίτων ἐπὶ θύρας τὰς ἐκείνου οἷα δῆπου βεβακχευμένοι ὅσον μέντοι γυναικῶν ἦν χῆρον, αἳ γε μὴν συνοικοῦσαι τοῖς γεγαμηκόσι φρουρούμεναι μὲν τῷ νόμῳ, τῷ κλέει δὲ τοῦ κάλλους τοῦ κατὰ τὸν Πίνδον δεδουλωμένα προυτίμων συνοικεῖν ἐκείνῳ ἢ θεαὶ γεγονέναι. (*NA* 10.48, p. 255, lines 21–25)

And they used to go his doorstep like Bacchantes, as many, of course, who were widows; nevertheless, those who were dwelling with their husbands, kept in check by the law, but enslaved by the report of Pindos' beauty, were preferring to dwell with him rather than to become goddesses.

This fascinating passage plays with the boundaries between mortal and divine in several ways. The detail of the widows' *paraklausithuron* and Aelian's comparison of them to Bacchantes evokes not just Dionysus' divine power of inverting social (as well as literary) conventions, but also Euripides' *Bakkhai*, the paradigmatic literary depiction of the god's epiphany. In that play, of course, Dionysus explains at the outset that his motivation for driving the Theban women from their households and overturning the established order was his anger at Thebes' refusal to accept his divinity: "for this city must learn, even if it doesn't want to, that it is uninitiated in my Bacchic rites, that I am defending my mother Semele, appearing to mortals as the divinity that my mother bore for Zeus" (E. *Ba.* 39–42). By depicting the unconventional behavior of the local widows who are in love with Pindos and by comparing them explicitly with Dionysus' frenzied Bacchantes (βεβακχευμένοι, *NA* 10.48, p. 255, line 22), Aelian once again recalls a mythological background in which divinity is contested and

consequently proven. This background is further reinforced by Aelian's statement that the married women, though bound by convention to remain at the sides of their husbands, preferred to live with Pindos "rather than to become goddesses" (ἢ θεαὶ γεγονέναι, line 25).⁴⁷ Even if understood as an unattainable wish, the statement is thematically linked to the narrative's overall exploration of the boundary between mortality and divinity.

Against this mythological background Aelian offers his depiction of Pindos, the tale's central character. From the beginning of the story, Pindos is described in superlative terms and is contrasted sharply with his brothers, not just for his physical beauty, but also for his manly courage, his virtue, and his general prosperity (*NA* 10.48, p. 254, lines 10–14). Things become even more prosperous after he enters into a tributary relationship with the mysterious, giant snake:

ὑπῆρχετο δὲ καὶ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ δαίμονος εὐθηνεῖσθαι τῷ Πίνδῳ, καὶ ὅσημέραι χωρεῖν εἰς τὸ σοβαρώτερον· θηρῶντι γὰρ ἀπῆντων εὐθηρίαι, ὅσαι τε τῶν ἐν ταῖς ὕλαις ζώων, τῶν τε ὀρνίθων ὅσαι. ἦν οὖν αὐτῷ καὶ περιβολή, καὶ διεῖρπε μέντοι καὶ κλέος ὥς ὁμόσε τοῖς θηρίοις ἰόντος καὶ ἀτρέπτως αἰροῦντος αὐτὰ· ἦν δὲ καὶ ἰδεῖν μέγας καὶ οἶος ἐκπλήξαι τῷ τε ὄγκῳ τοῦ σώματος καὶ τῇ εὐεξίᾳ προσέτι, τῇ δὲ ὥρᾳ τὸ θῆλυ πᾶν ἀνέφλεγε καὶ εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἐξάπτων ἦν δῆλος. (*NA* 10.48, p. 255, lines 14–21)

And the things proceeding from the divinity too began to flourish for Pindos, and daily to become more impressive. For when he hunted he met with successes, both with woodland creatures and with birds. And so he had also abundance, and his fame too spread, in the belief that where he went, the wild animals went, and that he caught them without hesitation. And he was also great to look upon and able to inspire awe both by the bulky frame of his body and by his physical fitness besides, and because of his beauty he began to ignite all the women and was clearly inflaming them to desire for himself.

By "the things proceeding from the divinity" (τὰ ἐκ τοῦ δαίμονος), Aelian surely must mean simply Pindos' fortune or good luck, but the language that Aelian uses to describe the situation establishes Pindos' relationship with the snake as the beginning of divine favor. And while the snake is nowhere explicitly referred to as divine, it is implied that the disembodied voice warning Pindos away from the fawns belongs to the snake, and this protective attitude towards the fawns is remarkably similar to the behavior of Apollo at his sanctuary Kourion on the island of Cyprus (*NA* 11.7).⁴⁸ But the rich description of Pindos' prosperity is tinged with hints

⁴⁷ Cf. *Hld.* 3.4.8.

⁴⁸ On a possible connection with Zeus Meilichios, see Ogden 2013: 282–283.

of the excesses that will ultimately lead to his destruction. Pindos' good fortune is, for example, ambiguously said by the narrator "daily to become more impressive" (όσημέραι χωρεῖν εἰς τὸ σοβαρώτερον, *NA* 10.48, p. 255, line 15), but the adjective σοβαρώτερον could be taken in its negative sense as "more swaggering, pompous, or haughty."⁴⁹

There is also the curiously expressed "abundance" (περιβολή, *NA* 10.48, p. 255, line 17) that Pindos experiences. Contemporary educated readers would recognize the word as a technical term from their rhetorical training. The rhetorical theorist Hermogenes dedicates an entire chapter to *peribolē*, but at its most basic, "Abundance (περιβολή) occurs whenever you add something extraneous (ἐξωθέν) to the subject matter of the speech" (Hermog. *Id.* 1.11.16–17). The effect is a defining feature of Demosthenes' style, and the great orator employed it, according to Hermogenes, to achieve rhetorical grandeur (τὸ μέγεθος). It was also, according to Philostratus, developed by Isocrates, the Roman-era sophist Niketes of Smyrna, and was apparently still in vogue among Aelian's contemporaries (*VS* 503 and 511). But despite the grandiose effect, the unavoidable fact is that *peribolē* is by definition superfluous ornamentation, and the vanity of the rhetorical device can be seen by the fact that "its opposite is rhetorical purity" (ἐναντίον αὐτῇ ἡ καθαρότης, Hermog. *Id.* 1.11.14). Morally speaking, then, an excessive use of *peribolē* could be construed as a dubious obstacle to clarity and an unnecessary extravagance. In a curious linking of contemporary rhetorical practice with religious thought, Aelian's description of Pindos' prosperity as a *peribolē* tinges his success with excess. Pindos' divinely endowed grandeur is reflected in his impressive bodily frame, but his muscular physique and his *kleos* also inspire an erotic desire that subverts social conventions and ultimately leads to his destruction at the hands of his envious brothers.

Pindos' divinely granted *peribolē* raises him dangerously close to the level of divinity. Aelian's emphasis on the young man's massive physical presence and the way in which he attracts the gaze of the local population – women *and* men – figures Pindos as a kind of living statue, a perfect object of popular adoration, in much the same way that the eponymous heroine of Chariton's *Kallirhoe* is represented as a living Aphrodite.⁵⁰ Pindos, in other words, has as a living man achieved quasi-divine status. Unlike Zeus or Dionysus, however, who proved their divinity when it was contested, Pindos is proven to be mortal, despite his successes, fame, and superlative beauty. Though he maintains his close relationship with

⁴⁹ LSJ σοβαρός II.

⁵⁰ Egger 1994: 38; Hunter 1994: 1075; and Smith 2007: 58, 99–100.

the mysterious snake even after death, and though the river where he was murdered is named after him, true immortality eludes Pindos. The etiological notice with which Aelian concludes the narrative serves as a reminder of the limited, partial ways in which mere mortals may achieve immortality.

The story of Pindos and the snake would have had profound religious relevance for Aelian's readers. In Rome in the third century, the privilege of becoming divine was reserved for the emperor alone – though the extraordinary Julia Domna too was granted the title *diva*⁵¹ – and indeed the contemporary discourse on the boundary between mortality and divinity was focused on the imperial ruler cult. With the exception of the usurpers Didius Julianus, Macrinus, and Diadumenius, all of the emperors who reigned during the lifetime of Aelian were deified after death, and Elagabalus was famously even treated as a god in his own lifetime. An emperor's chances of becoming a god were by no means secure merely by his taking the throne, but neither was divinity granted as a kind of honorarium for the emperor's good behavior: even the tyrants Commodus and Caracalla received public worship as *divi*. In the private sphere of the household, as well, the *genius* of the emperor received veneration. The divinity of the emperor was, in other words, a pervasive aspect of religious life and a subject of much discussion in Rome by the third century.

Ittai Gradel is right to insist that it is anachronistic to impose a strict distinction between religion and politics during this period. Thus, while the religious worship of a human being might seem strange to us, in the Rome of Aelian's time the boundary between mortal and divine was seen in relative terms. In a context as hierarchical as that of Rome's during the reign of the Severans, when society was organized according to relationships of master/slave, patron/client, emperor/senate, the divine honors bestowed upon an emperor – whether posthumously or even while alive – could be seen as a logical extension of his secular honors. Temples, priests, priestesses, ritual sacrifice, and the other trappings of divinity were, according to Gradel, “ultimately an aspect of the honours-for-benefactions structure found in all relationships between parties of vastly unequal power and social standing in Roman society.”⁵² Gradel goes on to hypothesize that the dividing line between man and god in Roman thought was not absolute (i.e., divinity was not an essential, innate quality), but rather a stylization of status distinction between two parties.

⁵¹ Levick 2007: 124–144.

⁵² Gradel 2002: 26.

Be that as it may, Aelian's narrative of the rise and fall of Pindos emerges from a background of skepticism and doubt about the deification of mortals. Seneca had long ago parodied the system in his *Apocolocyntosis*, and by denying the "deified" Claudius the status of a true god, Seneca reinforced the notion of absolute divinity.⁵³ Feeney is surely right that Seneca's satire showed emperor worship to be "a vigorous and muscular institution which could provoke and sustain interrogation and debate . . . criticism and testing was part of the apotheosis technique."⁵⁴ A century before Aelian, Plutarch rejected outright the notion that a mortal man might be made a god directly, asserting instead that "truly and according to right reason" (ἀληθείᾳ καὶ κατὰ τὸν εἰκότα λόγον) souls must progress by stages, passing first from being men (ἐκ μὲν ἀνθρώπων), to being heroes (ἥρωας), then demigods (δαίμονας), and only then to becoming gods (θεούς).⁵⁵ Plutarch was responding to the story of the supposed apotheosis of Romulus, but writing in the late first or early second century CE he was surely also responding indirectly to the contemporary deification of Roman emperors. But skepticism and doubt about emperor worship need not have arisen solely from the literary or philosophical tradition. Aelian himself witnessed how the murdered Caracalla achieved divine status as a *hērōs* simply because his successor Macrinus was eager to consolidate his authority with the army; the measure was even ratified by the senate, despite their hatred of the dead emperor.⁵⁶ If Aelian had not already been skeptical of emperor worship, such an event could only have inspired disillusion. Aelian was not alone: Cassius Dio, too, wished for the imperial cult to be abolished or at least for adulation of the emperor during life to return to the modesty of a previous age, if we may read the lengthy speech of Maecenas before Octavian as an articulation of Cassius Dio's own political agenda (D.C. 52.35.3–36.1).⁵⁷ Furthermore, the young Elagabalus' imposition of his own divinity was surely a part of what motivated Aelian's outrage that the emperor had "disgraced Roman affairs" (τὰ Ῥωμαίων ἥσχυσε, Philostr. VS 625). Finally, in the generation following Aelian's death, during a period of financial and military crisis, the emperor Maximinus ordered as a dire cost-cutting measure that public honors cease to be paid to the *divi*.⁵⁸ The episode attests to the continued significance of the cult, but it also, as Gradel points out, reveals that the deified emperors "were basically powerless, and the risk

⁵³ Sen. *Apoc.* 11. ⁵⁴ Feeney 1998: 111. ⁵⁵ Plu. *Rom.* 28.10.

⁵⁶ D.C. 79.9.2, SHA, *Caracalla* 11.5.

⁵⁷ See Bowersock 1973: 205, Manuwald 1979, Fishwick 1990: 273–275, and Swain 1996: 407.

⁵⁸ Hdn. 7.3.5.

of divine anger from their quarter was negligible . . . they were the lowest ranking of all state gods.”⁵⁹

Against this background of skepticism and doubt about the imperial cult, Aelian’s narrative ends up reinforcing the firm division between mortality and divinity as something neither porous nor negotiable. On one level, the story depicts the relative scale of divinity described by Gradel. Pindos’ superlative qualities, for example, raise him to an exalted position above other mortals, but Pindos himself is shown to be subordinate to and dependent upon the snake, to which he regularly offers the “payment for salvation” (μισθὸν σωτηρίας, *NA* 10.48, p. 255, line 11) that is implied to be the source of his abundance and elevated status. On another level, though, Pindos’ death and tomb are stark reminders of the limitations of mortality, in contrast to which Aelian suggests true divinity as being disembodied and ineffable. The voice that enjoins Pindos to desist from his pursuit of the fawns comes from nowhere, and Pindos never sees its source (πολλὰ περιβλέψας οὐδὲν ἐθεάσατο, p. 254, lines 26–27).⁶⁰ Though the voice is later implied to belong to the snake, Aelian never explicitly depicts the snake speaking. The narrative gap separating Pindos’ hearing of the voice and the epiphany of the serpent a day later opens up the possibility that the voice, pure *logos*, belongs to some agent other than the snake, a higher power whom we never see and whose identity we never learn. Aelian therefore offers a paradoxical sense of the divine as potentially proximate to mortals, but at the same time distant, mysterious, and unknowable.

Conclusion

A number of themes recur in Aelian’s treatment of the relationship between animals and divinity: many different animals are sacred to different gods and often play an important symbolic role in cult, animals appear in several etiological narratives about the gods, many animals are distinguished for their religious piety, animals may even receive worship as gods by humans, and the behaviors and life cycles of some animals were even thought to be in sympathy with the divine forces in the natural world. The cast of gods and goddesses in the *NA* is richly varied, though for the most part traditional. The noteworthy prominence, however, of Helios – third in frequency only after Apollo and Zeus – is probably due to the special

⁵⁹ Gradel 2002: 358.

⁶⁰ Cf. the disembodied voice of Pan at Longus 2.27 and the story of the encounter between Herodes Atticus and Herakles-Agathion at Philostr. *VS* 552–554.

relationship of the sun god to the Severan emperors through Julia Domna. But the relevance of Helios was not only political. The sun god – whether Greek Helios, Roman Sol, Syrian Elagabal, or Egyptian Horus – unified peoples and cultures. Aelian's interest in the sun therefore may be seen as consistent with his Hellenism: if Greek literature offered an ideal medium for absorbing and communicating the distinguishing qualities of disparate cultural traditions, then the sun, whose celestial power was recognized by every nation on earth, was for Aelian an ideal, universalizing symbol of the divine.

Aelian's dynamic relationship with the divine is conveyed in his creative handling of numerous narratives and myths. Myth was, on the one hand, the source of some anxiety for the author of the *NA*, as it connoted fabrication, an unsophisticated appeal to pleasure, and was generally thought to be opposed to truth. On the other hand, many examples in the *NA* reveal that truth was a relative concept for Aelian, and it was possible for him to conceive of *muthopoiêsis* as entirely appropriate within his expansive literary project. Moreover, it was through the creative manipulation of myth that Aelian was able to make meaningful connections between literature and contemporary thinking about divinity. Two examples make this point clear.

The tale of Herakleïs and the stork takes its narrative basis and themes from a traditional story type, along the lines of the tale of the widow of Ephesus from Petronius' *Satyricon*. But Aelian's version departs significantly from the Petronian tale. Whereas the story of the widow of Ephesus is obsessed with the sensual and with the satisfaction of bodily desires, Aelian transforms those themes, resublimating them to the realm of the divine. This is accomplished in part through the redeployment of Syrian religious imagery that was evocative of carnal desires. In the tale of Herakleïs and the stork, Aelian therefore translates a foreign symbolic system relevant to the religious landscape of Severan Rome by (a) incorporating that system within a familiar Greco-Roman narrative and (b) reorienting the narrative away from the corporeal and toward the celestial.

The story of Pindos and the snake deals with the boundary between human and divine, a theme central to Roman religious thinking during the Imperial period. Pindos is an exceptional individual whose exceptional qualities are further enhanced as a result of his contact and tributary relationship with a giant snake that may or may not be an avatar for a god. Pindos' celebrity elevates him to near-divine status, but his downfall reveals the nature of true divinity. The giant snake avenges Pindos' murder and Pindos even gives his name to the river where he dies, both memorializing

the landscape and generating myth. But this limited form of immortality is paradoxically dependent on mortality. Aelian's narrative thereby contributes to the debate on the permeability of the divine – focused on contemporary skepticism about the imperial cult – by characterizing divinity as ultimately mysterious, unknowable, and unable to be breached by human mortality.

Egypt and India

Aelian gives ample space in the *NA* to the natural and cultural curiosities of both Egypt and India. Individual chapters on each are, as expected, scattered throughout the work, but there are also significant clusters of Egyptian and Indian chapters. Much of Books 10 and 11, for example, is dedicated to Egypt, while most of the chapters in Book 16 are dedicated to India. It is during these lengthy Egyptian and Indian phases of the text when Aelian most obviously breaks from the structural variety with which he has patterned the rest of his work. Greek writers since Homer were fascinated by Egypt and India. Both places sparked the imagination for their perceived geographic distance from the Greco-Roman “center” of the world. Moreover, both places were thought to be a source of wisdom that was prior to Greek culture. But by the third century CE, a comparison of these two non-Hellenic sources of wisdom seems to have become commonplace.

Philostratus offers one such narrative *sunkrisis* of Egyptian and Indian wisdom culture in the *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*. Apollonios journeys first to India, where he meets the gymnosophists, with whom he engages in extended philosophical discussion and whose mystical rites he witnesses (Book 3). Later, during his journey into Egypt, Apollonios meets the gymnosophists who dwell by the Nile, and the oldest among them, a man named Thespesion, boasts of their own superiority to the sages of India, even employing as an analogue the story of the Choice of Herakles made famous by Prodikos in the fifth century BCE: the Indian gymnosophists, with their luxurious living, are more like Vice; whereas the Egyptian gymnosophists, dedicated to simplicity and living in harmony with nature, are more like Virtue (6.10.2–6).¹ Whereupon Apollonios offers a series of elaborate explanations for why these sages are actually inferior to their Indian counterparts. First, the Indians’ wisdom is akin to his own Pythagorean

¹ See Platt 2009: 144–149.

beliefs (6.11.1–12). Second, the fact that the Egyptian gymnosophists identify themselves by slandering their Indian brethren (6.11.13–14) is for Apollonios an obvious sign of their inferiority to the Indians. Third, he offers a lengthy defense of adornment and ornamentation (κόσμος, 15–19), such as that enjoyed by the Indians. Finally, Apollonios praises the Indians' ability to rise above the surface of the earth and commune with the sun god: "and everyone wishes for this, but the Indians alone are capable of it" (τοῦτο δὲ βούλονται μὲν πάντες, δύνανται δὲ Ἴνδοι μόνοι, 20). Some scholars have explained Philostratus' privileging of India over Egypt as reflecting a contemporary shift of religious thought towards the East under the Severan emperors.²

Unlike the *Life of Apollonios*, the *NA* is free of an overarching, linear narrative and hence the perceived compulsion to evaluate and contrast on the basis of a single philosophical ideal. The reader of the *NA* gets only a hint of this background comparing India and Egypt in a passage where Aelian contrasts the relative merits of an Indian *pharmakon*, acquired from the droppings of a tiny bird known as the *dikaïron*, and the famous drug employed by Helen in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*:

ἐπεὶ τὸ μὲν ἐφ' ἡμέραν αὐτὴν ἀνεῖχε τε καὶ ἀνέστελλε τὰ δάκρυα τὸ Αἰγύπτιον, τὸ δὲ λήθην κακῶν παρεῖχεν αἰώνιον τὸ Ἰνδικόν· καὶ τὸ μὲν γυναικὸς δῶρον ἦν, τὸ δὲ ὄρνιθος ἢ ἀπορρήτου φύσεως δεσμῶν τῶν ὄντως βαρυτάτων ἀπολυούσης δι' ὑπηρέτου τοῦ προκειμένου καὶ προειρημένου. καὶ Ἰνδοὺς κτήσασθαι εὐτυχήσαντας αὐτό, ὥς τῆς ἐνταυθοῖ φρουρᾶς ἀπολυθῆναι ὅταν ἐθέλωσιν. (*NA* 4.42, p. 92, lines 3–9)

The Egyptian one held back and restrained tears for the day alone, but the Indian one offered a forgetfulness of troubles that lasted forever. And the one was the gift of a woman, but the other was the gift of a bird or of unspeakable nature, which sets one free from bonds that are truly the most burdensome through the agency of the aforementioned servant at hand. And the Indians are fortunate to possess it, since they are released from the prison of this world whenever they wish.

Thus, the *NA* in this instance adopts a mainstream conceptual framework – the literary *sunkrisis* – for depicting Egypt and India. On the whole, however, Aelian refrains from engaging in synoptic comparisons of Egypt and India. Both exist in the *NA* as equally valid imaginative spaces for reworking traditional material and motifs and for thinking and reflecting upon Aelian's own world through the lens of cultural difference. Even if we grant

² Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1937. On Philostratus' story of Apollonios among the Indian gymnosophists, see Festugière 1941–1943.

that aspects of Aelian's Egypt and India resemble some objective, historical reality, it must be remembered that the Egypt and India of the *NA* are literary constructions. In this sense, Aelian's ethnography is a creative act, the participation in a centuries-old discourse wherein Egypt and India are continually remade within Greco-Roman culture. In what follows, I offer an analysis of Aelian's depiction of these two places that dominated the Greco-Roman imagination and I also consider how those depictions reflect the contemporary events and religious concerns of Severan Rome.

Egypt

Sources

Aelian used numerous sources for his chapters on the animals and customs of Egypt. Herodotus, of course, was a source, but perhaps surprisingly Aelian mentions Herodotus only twice within chapters that are explicitly about Egyptian animals (*NA* 8.24 and 11.10). The writer Apion, who lived in Alexandria in the first century CE, receives as many notices in chapters on Egypt (10.29 and 11.40).³ Aelian's other named sources for Egypt, however, each receive only one notice.⁴ It is possible that Aelian also drew upon Plutarch's treatise *On Isis and Osiris*, though that author is nowhere named in the *NA*. In total, then, we have ten named sources for Aelian's Egyptography, spaced over nine individual chapters (11.10 contains a reference to both Herodotus and Aristagoras, and 10.16 contains a reference to both Eudoxos and Manethon) out of the total seventy-seven chapters on Egypt in the *NA*. It is safe to say, therefore, that Aelian only infrequently cites individual sources by name when documenting Egyptian animals and customs.

More common, however, is for Aelian to mention "the Egyptians" or "Egyptian *logoi*" generally as a source within individual chapters on Egypt, a Herodotean trope that Aelian's readers surely would have recognized. Thus, we find recurring phrases (with slight variation) such as, "the Egyptians say" (οἱ Αἰγύπτιοι λέγουσι or Αἰγύπτιοί φασι),⁵ "I hear from the Egyptians who say" (Αἰγυπτίων ἀκούω λεγόντων),⁶ "I have heard besides

³ For Aelian's use of Herodotus and Apion, see Maspero 1998: 21.

⁴ Aristagoras (11.10; cf. *FGrH* 608), Eudemos (5.7; cf. fr. 132 Wehrli), Eudoxos (10.16; cf. fr. 301 Lasserre), Manethon (10.16; cf. *FGrH* 609), Pammenes (16.42, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 16.14.1–2), Phylarkhos (17.5; cf. *FGrH* 81), Ptolemaios Philopator (7.40; cf. *FGrH* 275, fr. 53b), and Theophrastos (15.26; cf. fr. 174.8 Wimmer).

⁵ *NA* 2.35, 4.56, 6.7, 7.19, 9.21, 10.14, 10.28, 10.31, 10.46, 10.47, 11.10, 11.11, 11.39, 12.3, 12.7, 16.39.

⁶ *NA* 7.8, 8.4, 16.39 (Αἰγύπτιοι λόγοι).

in Egyptian *logoi*” (ἐν Αἰγυπτίοις λόγοις προσακήκοα),⁷ and even “the Egyptians provide a witness who says” (μάρτυρα Αἰγύπτιοι ἐπάγονται λέγοντα).⁸ “The Egyptians” or “Egyptian *logoi*” are mentioned as sources in nineteen of the total seventy-seven Egyptian chapters in the *NA*, or 25% of the time.

The prominence of Egyptian sources in the *NA* could mean several things. Aelian could be referring to anonymous Egyptian histories or religious treatises that had been translated into Greek. One passage even offers a glimpse of the author as he is faced by the linguistic challenge of putting a word from an anonymous Egyptian source into Greek: “The Egyptians revere also a black bull, and they call it Onouphis. And the name of the place where it is reared, let the Egyptian *logoi* speak it for us, for it is rough (τραχύ)” (*NA* 12.11). Another possibility is that Aelian could be referring to anonymous Egyptian sources cited by any of the above Greek authors whose texts he had before him.⁹ Also relevant here is the possibility of Aelian’s familiarity with his contemporary Athenaeus, who came from Naukratis in Egypt. It may be that Aelian used that writer’s *Deipnosophistai* in some of his Egyptian chapters, though Dorothy Thompson has shown the limitations of Athenaeus’ knowledge of Egypt prior to the Hellenistic period.¹⁰

But we should not only look for literary explanations for the prominence of Egyptian sources in the *NA*. Twice, in fact, Aelian refers to Egyptian art. In a chapter about the reverence shown to cows at Khousai in Egypt, based upon the animal’s erotic nature and its affinity to Heavenly Aphrodite, Aelian notes that, “even Isis herself the Egyptians depict in both sculpture and painting (καὶ πλάττουσι καὶ γράφουσι) as having the horns of a cow” (*NA* 10.27). In another chapter, Aelian discusses the hybrid form of the sphinx, basing his account on both traditional lore and artistic evidence: “and the sphinx, with her double nature, both Egyptian craftsmen, when they sculpt her (Αἰγύπτιοι τε χειρουργοὶ γλύφοντες), and Theban myths, when they boast of her, try to show her to us as biform, giving her an air of solemnity by the blending of maiden and leonine body” (12.7). There is every reason to believe that these remarks were informed by Aelian’s first-hand experience of Egyptian art (or Roman art in the Egyptian style), an abundance of which could be found in Rome itself. Isis was, of course, on prominent display throughout Rome, most notably in her famous precinct and sanctuary in the Campus Martius, which incorporated within its architecture genuinely Egyptian elements (see Fig. 2). A well-known

⁷ *NA* 10.29.

⁸ *NA* 5.39.

⁹ Cf. Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1972.

¹⁰ Thompson 2000.



Fig. 2 Temple relief from Behbeit el-Hagar, in Egypt (fourth century BCE), reused in the Temple of Isis in the Campus Martius. Palazzo Altemps, Rome.

fragment of a marble relief in the Palazzo Altemps in Rome provides strong evidence for popular participation in ritual within the temple of Isis, which was itself characterized by numerous animals and/or animal representations (statues of baboons, ibises, the sacred bull; see Figs. 3–5). The iconography of the precinct of Isis in the Campus Martius, with its cow-horned goddess and sphinxes, was replicated in numerous sites throughout Rome.¹¹ One Roman sanctuary of Isis and Sarapis was in *Regio III*, below the Caelian Hill, which an anonymous report from 1664 describes as being decorated with wall paintings and plaster reliefs depicting winged animals, ibises, and sphinxes. Another was on the lower slopes of the Aventine, beside the Tiber, dating from the late second century CE, the walls of which were covered with graffiti in both Greek and Latin declaring worship of Isis.¹²

Also relevant in considering Aelian's Egyptian sources is the frequency with which he employs the verbs ἀκούω (“I hear”) and προσακήκοα (“I have heard in addition”). Aelian uses these verbs in ten of the seventy-seven Egyptian chapters, or 13% of the time.¹³ Compare this to the Indian chapters, where, in cases when his source is unclear, Aelian uses variants

¹¹ *LTUR* 3.107–116. ¹² See Wild 1984: 1811–1817.

¹³ *NA* 2.38, 6.38, 7.8, 7.9, 7.41, 8.4, 10.24, 10.29, 10.45, and 12.4.

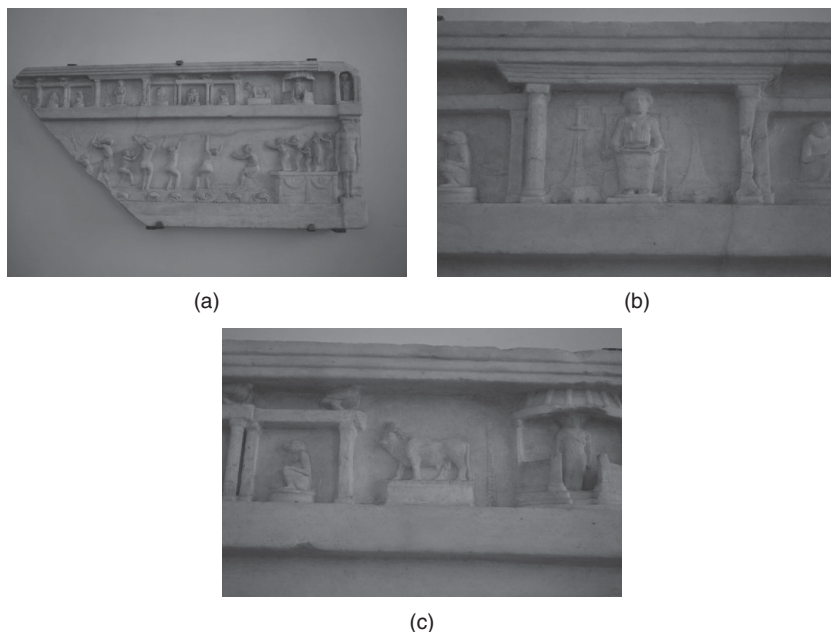


Fig. 3 (a) Fragment of a marble slab showing a scene of celebration at the Temple of Isis, probably the *Navigium Isidis* (March 5), inaugurating the seafaring season. The upper panel depicts the cult statue of Isis (centrally positioned) flanked by sacred baboons with ibises above them, the sacred bull Apis, and the god Bes (far right). See Figs. 3b–c for details. The relief dates to c. 100 CE. Palazzo Altemps, Rome. (b) Marble relief depicting the cult statue of Isis in the Campus Martius. Detail of Fig. 3a. (c) Marble relief depicting statues of sacred baboon, ibis, the sacred bull, and the god Bes from the Temple of Isis in the Campus Martius. Detail of Fig. 3a.

of the verb ἀκούω a mere 5% of the time.¹⁴ I attribute the comparatively high frequency of narrative uses of ἀκούω in the Egyptian chapters at least in part to Aelian's acquaintance with Egyptians in Rome, whether those Egyptians were men of letters, priests or others connected with the cults of Isis or Sarapis, merchants, or possibly even Aelian's students. I grant that this is speculative. After all, Aelian at times uses the verb ἀκούω when he obviously means that he has gathered his information from books, e.g. on his reading of, *inter alios*, Aristotle (ἐγώ γε τοῦ παιδὸς τοῦ Νικομάχου λέγοντος ἦκουσα, 2.34) or Megasthenes (Μεγασθένους ἀκούω λέγοντος, 8.7). But we also know that Aelian was *not* bound by an artificially imposed rule that he could only cite literary sources in the *NA*;

¹⁴ i.e. in only four of the seventy-nine Indian chapters: 6.21, 16.4, 16.5, and 16.20.

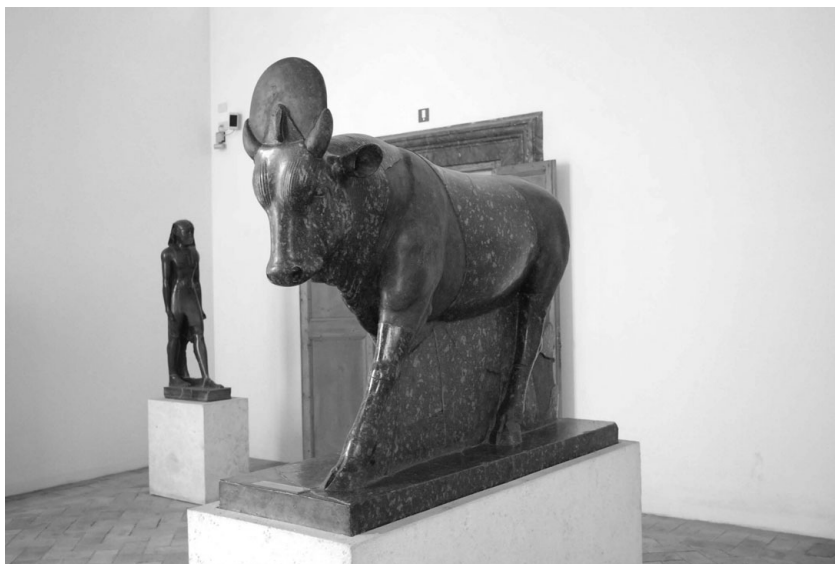


Fig. 4 The Egyptian sacred bull, Apis, dating from the second century BCE. Found in 1886 in fragments on the Esquiline Hill. Palazzo Altemps, Rome.

on the contrary, he freely incorporated material that he had gathered from first-hand experience or from conversations with friends.¹⁵ On balance, then, it seems only likely that at least some of Aelian's anonymous Egyptian sources may have been actual Egyptians whom he knew in Rome. One can easily imagine the inquisitive researcher haunting the precinct of Isis in the Campus Martius and bending the ear of one of the Egyptian priests for some authentic animal lore from the Nile. This seems a plausible frame within which to read Aelian's strong statement that when Egyptians speak, "men who love wisdom do not listen to them with indifference" (ῥαθύμως αὐτῶν οὐκ ἀκούουσιν ἄνδρες φιλόσοφοι, 4.56).

Representational qualities

In setting forth his fragmentary account of Egypt, Aelian draws upon traditional motifs. Certain quintessentially Egyptian animals receive due treatment in the Egyptian chapters of the *NA*. These are (in descending order of frequency): the asp, hawk, crocodile, bull, dog, ibis, ichneumon,

¹⁵ The most obvious examples are *NA* 2.11 (p. 35, line 27), 2.56, 5.26, 5.47, 7.15, and 13.12. On Aelian's claim to autopsy at 11.40, see [Chapter 1](#).



Fig. 5 Statue of a sacred baboon (the Egyptian god Thot) from the Sarapeum in the Campus Martius, second century CE. Vatican Museums.

and the phoenix.¹⁶ The hawk is prominent for its sacred quality among the Egyptians, and Aelian relies upon the traditional assimilation of the Egyptian hawk-god Horus to the more familiar Apollo (NA 10.14). But Aelian also reveals the difficulty and the zoological subtleties required in attempting to impose a one-to-one correspondence between the gods of Egypt and the gods of the Greco-Roman world. It is not enough merely to assert that the hawk is Apollo's bird, for elsewhere Aelian reveals that "the species of hawks are very numerous (πράπολλα)" and they "are divided and allotted to many gods," including (in addition to Apollo) Athena, Hermes, Hera, Artemis, and the Mother of the Gods. The list could go on, Aelian suggests, "one [hawk] to one god, another to another" (ἄλλον δὲ ἄλλω θεῷ, 12.4).

Aelian also emphasizes in several chapters the symbiosis among animals (humans included) in their Nilotic setting. It is a landscape of natural abundance, where the Stoic ideal of living in harmony with nature seems to be more easily achieved. Characteristic in this regard is the cooperation between the bird known as the *trokhilos*, the crocodile, and the ichneumon (NA 3.11 and 8.24). Aelian even highlights the bond of *euergesia* that Egyptians are able to cultivate with cats, ichneumons, crocodiles, and hawks (4.45). Moreover, several creatures are noted as living in synchronicity with the rising and ebbing of the Nile¹⁷ or, like the ibis and the dog, with the waxing and waning of the moon.¹⁸

But by far the most common motif in the Egyptian chapters is the role of animals in Egyptian religion, especially the Egyptians' worship of animals as gods. Fascination with this aspect of Egyptian life had a long tradition in Greek and Roman literature, going at least as far back as Hekataios of Miletos, said by Porphyrios to be an important source for Herodotus,¹⁹ whose own famous ethnography of Egypt in Book 2 of the *Histories* approaches the topic with detached curiosity. Other writers from the Greek Classical period, such as Anaxandrides, Antiphanes, Timokles, Isocrates, and Plato, were more hostile. Ridicule of Egyptian animal worship as a means of asserting Greek superiority may even be seen as a response to a perceived inferiority to Egyptian culture, which was far older and which could claim its own superior brand of wisdom.²⁰ The cultural transformations brought

¹⁶ Asp: NA 3.22, 4.56, 5.52, 6.38, 9.11, 9.61, 10.31, 11.32, 17.5. Hawk: NA 2.43, 4.45, 5.36, 7.9, 10.14, 10.24, 11.39, 12.4. Crocodile: NA 4.45, 8.4, 8.24, 10.21, 10.24, 17.6. Bull: NA 10.28, 11.10, 11.11, 11.40, 12.11. Dog: NA 5.46, 6.53, 7.12, 10.45, 11.27. Ibis: NA 2.35, 2.38, 7.41, 10.29. Ichneumon: NA 3.22, 4.45, 8.24, 10.47. Phoenix: NA 6.58.

¹⁷ NA 10.19, 10.43, 10.45, 10.46. ¹⁸ NA 2.35, 2.38, 10.45.

¹⁹ The testimony of Porphyrios is preserved at Eus. PE 10.3.16 Mras.

²⁰ Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1884.

about by Ptolemaic rule in Egypt produced a shift in Greek thinking about Egyptian religion,²¹ but whereas there was an increased respect for Egyptian gods, Egyptian animal worship was still viewed with skepticism. The Hellenistic historian Diodoros of Sicily, in his lengthy excursus on Egyptian animal worship (1.83–90), reflects an abiding fascination, but in his judgment about its excess (καθ’ ὑπερβολήν, 1.83.1) one notes the familiar Greek distaste for the custom.²² Roman authors – equally fascinated by Egyptian culture and religion – voiced hostility towards Egyptian animal worship, whether for purposes of political propaganda, such as the anti-Egyptian elements in Augustan poetry, or to satirize an alien culture: at the beginning of his fifteenth satire, Juvenal famously posed the question “Who does not know what sort of monsters foolish Egypt worships?” (*Quis nescit . . . qualia demens | Aegyptos portenta colat?*, 15.1–2).²³ There were, nevertheless, adherents to Egyptian religion among the imperial elite before the Severan period, the emperors Domitian, Hadrian, and Commodus being the most prominent examples. And yet, despite the growing popularity of Egyptian culture in Rome into the third century, hostility toward Egyptian animal worship persisted, as Philostratus illustrates in the imagined debate between Apollonios of Tyana and the Egyptian gymnosophist Thespesion. The critical position is articulated by Apollonios himself, who speaks of the “strange and laughable forms” (ἄτοπα καὶ γελοῖα . . . εἶδη, *VA* 6.19.1) of the Egyptians’ theriomorphic deities and who describes their cults as “honors more for worthless and irrational animals than for gods” (ζῶων ἀλόγων καὶ ἀδόξων τιμαὶ μᾶλλον ἢ θεῶν).

Aelian’s relatively positive attitude towards Egyptian animal worship is, therefore, remarkable, as it avoids the outright disdain of the Roman tradition and hearkens back instead to the curiosity of Herodotus.²⁴ Rather than use ethnography to define a position of Greco-Roman cultural superiority, Aelian in fact strives for the universal in detailing the culturally specific. A lengthy passage on the worship of mice offers insight. Aelian begins with the statement that, “The Egyptians, then, both worshipping and making gods out of different kinds of animals, become a joke to most people at any rate” (Αἰγύπτιοι μὲν οὖν σέβοντές τε καὶ ἐκθεοῦντες γένη

²¹ For a complete treatment of Greek thinking about Egypt from the Classical to Hellenistic period, see Vasunia 2001. On the shift in Greek thinking during the Ptolemaic period, see Stephens 2003: 8.

²² Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1900.

²³ On representations of Egyptian animal worship as reflections of Greco-Roman culture, see Pfeiffer 2008.

²⁴ Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1971–1975. On Aelian’s depiction of the Egyptian snake-god Theromouthis, see Opelt 1959.

ζώων διάφορα γέλωτα ὀφλισκάνουσι παρά γε τοῖς πολλοῖς, *NA* 12.5). He then proceeds, however, to describe animal worship not among Egyptians, but surprisingly among Greeks. The weasel is worshiped among the Thebans in Greece for its role in the birth of Herakles. More famously, the people of Hamaxitos in the Troad worship mice at the sanctuary of Apollo Sminthios, and Aelian even narrates two alternative etiological myths to explain this curious Greek cult. Aelian concludes the chapter thus: “The recollection of mice, therefore, drew us into a theological discourse. But we are no worse off than we were before for having heard such things as this too” (ἡ μὲν οὖν τῶν μυῶν μνήμη προήγαγεν ἡμᾶς ἐς θεολογίαν τινά, χείρους δὲ αὐτῶν οὐ γεγόναμεν καὶ τοιαῦτα προσακούσαντες). Having framed the whole of the chapter around the long tradition of hostility towards Egyptian animal worship, Aelian challenges Greco-Roman readers to rethink the basis upon which they assume a position of cultural superiority. We are like the Egyptians, he suggests, even in this unsettling respect, but this does not diminish us in any way.

In their impressively far-reaching survey of ancient Greek and Roman attitudes to Egyptian animal worship, Smelik and Hemelrijk helpfully note that Aelian employs a combination of mythological, symbolic, legendary, and moralizing explanations, sometimes even offering several types of explanation within a single chapter. But whereas Smelik and Hemelrijk characterize Aelian’s approach as “confused,”²⁵ they nevertheless conclude their survey with several sensible assertions about the variable quality of attitudes towards Egyptian animal worship over time and within different cultures. Just as the conception of Egypt generally could be positive or negative, so too could Egyptian animal worship be sympathetically understood or disdained according to those alternative frames, despite that the trend was on the whole towards disdain and incomprehension.²⁶ It seems unwarranted, therefore, that Aelian’s explanations for Egyptian animal worship should be dismissively characterized as “confused,” when in fact his text reflects precisely the variability of interpretative approaches to the cultural phenomenon. Moreover, upon closer inspection, Aelian’s variable explanations for animal worship find a parallel in his representation of the variety of practice *among Egyptians themselves*, which confounds any single interpretative model.

In an elaborate chapter on crocodiles, for example, Aelian employs an aesthetic indeterminacy that erodes the presumption that Egyptian animal worship is itself a stable object of study. The whole of the passage is

²⁵ Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1974.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 1999–2000.

obsessed with the theme of consumption and eating, but the roles of eating subject and eaten object shift in unpredictable ways. Aelian humorously reports, for example, that the women among the Ombitai rejoice when their children are eaten by crocodiles, “in the belief that they have given birth to food and a feast for the god” (οἷα δῆπου τεκοῦσαι θεῷ βορὰν καὶ δεῖπνον, *NA* 10.21, p. 242, lines 5–6). Among the Apollonopolitai, however, who despise crocodiles, the creature is trapped, strung up in trees, beaten, and then is itself consumed as food (σιτοῦνται, line 11). The central portion of the chapter details the recurrence of the number sixty in the crocodile’s life cycles and in the shape of its body (lines 11–18).²⁷ Plutarch, too, gives a similar notice, even offering insight into the religious significance of the number sixty: “this is the first of the measures for those who inquire into heavenly things” (ὁ τῶν μέτρων πρῶτόν ἐστι τοῖς περὶ τὰ οὐράνια πραγματευομένοις, *Moralia* 381c). Based on this evidence, we might reconsider the religious significance of Philostratus’ remark that Aelian himself “lived more than sixty years” (ἐβίω δὲ ὑπὲρ τὰ ἐξήκοντα ἔτη, *VS* 625). Aelian concludes this numerological digression by noting that for a period of sixty days each year the crocodile hibernates and takes no food (ἀτρόφει, *NA* 10.21, p. 242, line 18). Resuming his contrast of the practices of the Ombitai and Apollonopolitai, Aelian states that the former offer as food to crocodiles the heads of animals that they have sacrificed, “for they themselves would not taste this part” (αὐτοὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἂν γεύσαιντο τοῦδε τοῦ μέρους, lines 21–22). The latter, however, hate the crocodile, either because this was the shape assumed by the god Typhon, or because, once upon a time, a crocodile ate the daughter of their beloved king Psammunthos.

The amphibolic structure of the chapter offers nothing decisive about the crocodile, which remains alternatively an object of worship and an object of hatred between two Egyptian populations. Even the etiology of the crocodile’s hatred among the Apollonopolitai is unsettled. Which is the *right* explanation: the myth about Typhon or the legend about the daughter of Psammunthos? Moreover, the central numerological digression about the special relationship between the crocodile and the number sixty hints that the natural world is the articulation of some transcendent, divine power, though Aelian does not make this explicit. The numerological digression focuses interpretative attention on the body and behaviors of the crocodile, but without asserting what the reader’s interpretation should be. The point of the text here, it seems, is not to pass judgment or to offer an original

²⁷ Cf. *NA* 2.33, 5.52. See also Ach. Tat. 4.19.

anthropological hypothesis, but to represent the mass of conflicting stories and beliefs among the Egyptians as having its own interest and literary value. The reader is, therefore, at the end of this chapter left suspended between the physical world and the divine, between the crocodile as god and the crocodile as mere beast, and between eating as the necessary satisfaction of bodily demands and eating (and being eaten) as an approach to the divine. Aelian's Egyptography is in literary terms, then, a further elaboration of the *poikilia* with which he styles the whole of the *NA*. Given such an ambiguous stylization, Aelian's writing about Egypt – and about the natural world in general – is bound to frustrate the reader who seeks only positivist certainty.

Contemporary relevance

The quintessentially Egyptian cult of the goddess Isis became official in Rome in 43 BCE, with the first public sanctuary in the city appearing some time in the first century CE, testimony to a growing fascination with Egypt over the centuries.²⁸ Imperial interest in Egyptian culture reaches new heights with Hadrian, whose connection with Egypt is abundantly attested in art and literature from his reign. One thinks especially of the Canopus duplicated in the imperial villa near Tivoli, the hexameter poem by Pankrates celebrating Hadrian's lion hunt in Egypt with his beloved Antinoos, and the four epigrams by the poetess Balbilla commemorating Hadrian's visit to the colossus of Memnon with his wife Sabina in 130 CE.²⁹

It is well known that Roman interest in Egypt and Egyptian religion continued or perhaps even intensified under the Severan emperors.³⁰ Both Septimius Severus and Caracalla were enthusiastic celebrants of the cult of Sarapis, and it has been suggested that Sarapis became "a full partner" with Isis in her precinct in the Campus Martius directly as a result of Septimius Severus' enthusiasm for the god.³¹ Dio tells of the journey made by Severus and Julia Domna into upper Egypt in 200 CE, where "he inquired into everything, even things that were very much concealed . . . and he

²⁸ See Malaise 1972a; Leclant 1984; Malaise 1984; Wild 1984; Takács 1995; Donaldson 2003; and Bricault, Versluys, and Meyboom 2007. On the attraction of the Isis cult to women, see Heyob 1975.

²⁹ See Page 1942: 516–519, Heitsch 1961: 51–54, and Brennan 1998.

³⁰ See, among many others, Rouillet 1972 and Takács 1995: 114–118. Levick 2007: 126 emphasizes Rome's "increasing recognition" of the Egyptian cults "over a long period of time" and argues against the notion that interest in the Egyptian cults in this period was the result of "a sudden Severan whim."

³¹ Wild 1984: 1813. Levick 2007: 133 may be right that Severus' interest in the cult of Sarapis "looks a little like that of a tourist," but it is no less genuine for that. See also Birley 1999: 135, 138.

removed from nearly all the temples all the books that he was able to find that contained anything secret" (76.13.2). The *Historia Augusta* notes that Severus himself afterwards always made it known that he had enjoyed this journey on account of his religious observance of the god Sarapis (*propter religionem dei Serapidis*, SHA, *Severus* 17.4) and on account of the novel animals and places that he saw, including Memphis, the pyramids, the labyrinth, and even the famous "singing" colossus of Memnon in Thebes.³² Philostratus' description of the colossus and his account of the visit to the site by Apollonios of Tyana (VA 6.4) recall Septimius Severus' own visit and restoration of the statue.³³ In the following generation, Caracalla "brought the cult of Isis to Rome and built magnificent temples everywhere to this same goddess" (SHA, *Caracalla* 9.10), and when he visited Alexandria in 215 CE, he even took up residence in the temple of Sarapis.³⁴ Imperial interest in Egyptian religion continued into the reign of Alexander Severus, who, according to the *Historia Augusta*, fitted out the temple of Isis and Sarapis at Rome *decenter* with statues, castrated slaves, and all the things pertaining to the mystic rites (SHA, *Alexander Severus* 26.8).

It is also well known that Aelian would have been familiar with the world of Egyptian imagery from his youth in Praeneste, where the famous Nile mosaic, dating from c. 120–110 BCE, was a prominent feature of the forum complex of Aelian's home town. The mosaic decorated the floor of a partially artificial grotto, where a shallow pool received water from the mountainside above; visitors would therefore have glimpsed the mosaic's scenes of Egyptian life along the Nile through the glistening surface of water in an apsidal nymphaeum that blended art and nature. The decorative grotto was itself part of the architectural background of the public forum of ancient Praeneste. Such Egyptianizing art was in vogue in Italy from the late second century BCE into Aelian's lifetime (Fig. 6), and so the mosaic at Praeneste was likely not inspired by intense religious sentiment at the time of its production, despite that its scenes suggest the worship of Isis and Osiris within the context of the cyclical inundations of the Nile. The mosaic's suggestions of the Isiac religion would have been seen as a suitably public design element, given Isis' syncretic association with Tukhe-Fortuna, the tutelary goddess of Praeneste.³⁵ Nevertheless, the mosaic doubtless would have inspired religious contemplation for viewers of later generations, especially in the late second and early third century

³² Str. 17.1.46 and Paus. 1.42.2. ³³ See Platt 2009: 136–144.

³⁴ D.C. 78.23.2. See also Hdn. 4.8.6–7.

³⁵ Meyboom 1995: 77–90. For the cult of Fortuna at Praeneste, see Cic. *Div.* 2.41.85–86. On the cult sanctuaries of Praeneste, see Coarelli 1987: 35–84.



Fig. 6 Floor mosaic depicting a scene from the Nile, second century CE. Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome.

CE, when the Egyptian cults had become the objects of intense religious interest at Rome.

Aelian's *Egyptography* was therefore very much a product of the literary and religious culture in Rome in the first quarter of the third century CE. In her intriguing paper on the intertwining of past and present in Aelian's works, Schettino rightly stresses the importance of Egypt in Aelian's vision of the world. Aelian's view of Roman history itself is constructed in the *NA* as being contingent with the history of Egypt, especially the fall of the Ptolemaic dynasty that coincided with Augustus' victory at Actium in 31 BCE.³⁶ Egypt even provides the subtext to several of the more prominent Roman episodes in the *NA*.³⁷ Aelian's reinvestment of Rome within the Egyptian past springs directly, according to Schettino, from the intense contemporary interest in Egyptian religion and culture under Caracalla.

One need not go so far as Schettino, however, in presuming for Aelian a Greco-Egyptian family background.³⁸ Further, her interpretation that

³⁶ Schettino 2005: 292.

³⁷ *NA* 7.18, 9.11, 9.61, 11.27, 11.35, and 12.6. Cf. also *NA* 6.58 (on the phoenix) with D.C. 58.27.1 (on the appearance of the phoenix on the eve of Tiberius' death).

³⁸ Schettino 2005: 304–305.

Aelian was a priest of Isis, while attractive, is also purely speculative. I remain skeptical. One would expect, for example, a priest of Isis to offer at least some devotional language in honor of the goddess, and yet there is none in the five rather blasé references to Isis in the *NA*.³⁹ Interestingly, however, there is devotional language in honor of the god Sarapis. There seems to be more than mere reportage, for example, in the statement that this “god takes pity on man and heals him” (οἰκτεῖρει μὲν οὖν τὸν ἄνδρα ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἰᾷται, 11.32). And considering the contemporary association of Sarapis with Asklepios,⁴⁰ the intensely devotional language in honor of Asklepios at *NA* 9.33 might by syncretism apply to the Egyptian god as well. If one were to speculate on the details of Aelian’s real-life religious activity, it seems equally valid to imagine him as a priest of Sarapis. But this, too, remains pure speculation.

I am also inclined to disagree with Schettino’s concluding interpretation of Aelian as playing some cultural or propagandistic role within the vicinity of Caracalla’s court.⁴¹ I have already established that the persona Aelian crafts in the *NA* is that of an independent intellectual, detached from the spheres of wealth, influence, and political power, a moralist at odds with the world around him. This persona ill suits the politically tied-in figure imagined by Schettino. The Egyptian connection here is significant, too. Given Aelian’s distaste for tyrannical violence, what would have been his response to Caracalla’s slaughter of the population of Alexandria in 215 CE – an episode entirely passed over in silence by Schettino?

Apparently angered by slurs publicly voiced against him by the people of Alexandria, namely that he was a fratricide and that he was involved in an incestuous relationship with his mother, Julia Domna,⁴² Caracalla visited the city under the pretense of celebrating a lavish festival in honor of the god Sarapis. The bait worked: the whole population, completely unaware of his real intention, came out to celebrate the emperor’s arrival. Herodian narrates particularly how Caracalla cruelly ensnared the young men of Alexandria. Promising to enroll them in a special battalion bearing the name of Alexander the Great, he gathered them together in full sight of their parents and family. While making his examination of their youthful bodies, his army drew ever closer, until “as he saw that they were now surrounded inside the circle of arms and were caught as if in hunting nets” (ὥς δὲ ἐτεκμήρατο ἥδη αὐτοὺς εἶναι ἐντὸς τῶν ὀπλῶν περιειλημμένους καὶ

³⁹ *NA* 10.22, 23, 27, 31, 45.

⁴⁰ D.C. 78.15.6.

⁴¹ Schettino 2005: 306–307.

⁴² D.C. 78.22.1 and Hdn. 4.9.3. On the slur against Julia Domna, see Levick 2007: 98–99.

ὥσπερ ἐν δικτύοις σεσαγηνευμένους, 4.9.6), he gave a signal that initiated the army's slaughter of the young, unarmed men.⁴³

In light of this episode, we might better understand why there are so few references to Alexandria in the *NA* and in the *VH*.⁴⁴ Even so, Aelian's fictional journey to Egypt, where he claims to have seen a malformed calf, seems provocative for its setting "in the great city of the Alexandrians" (ἐν τῇ πόλει τῇ Ἀλεξανδρέων τῇ μεγάλῃ, *NA* 11.40). Obviously there are no explicit references in the *NA* either to Caracalla or his bloody visit to Alexandria, so it is impossible to know precisely what Aelian thought about the infamous episode. Nevertheless, Herodian's simile, likening the entrapment of the young Alexandrians to a scene of hunting with nets and envisioning Caracalla as the hunter, suggests how that violent episode might receive alternative literary stylization. Analogous scenes in the *NA* offer some insight into one possible response. Turtle doves and stingrays (τρυγόνες and θαλάττια τρυγόνες, respectively) are drawn into nets without even realizing it by the lure of music and dancing, and for this they are objects of pity (δειλαίαις, *NA* 1.39). Similarly, in Etruria, men hunt by means of luring wild creatures into their nets with music. Aelian describes the stratagem as a perverse invasion of the natural world by human artifice. The melody from the piper-hunter's song "streams into" (εἰσρεῖ, *NA* 12.43) the various lairs of his prey, filling them with fear (δείματος): wild animals do not usually wander from the places they inhabit, but the wild animals of Etruria are made to wander into the hunters' nets because of the music, which has for Aelian the unconquerable power of a magic spell (ὥσπερ ὑπὸ τινος ἱυγγος ἀναπειθούσης). But most poignant is Aelian's account of the snaring of the *anthias* fish at the end of Book 12:

Ἀνθία δὲ βαλλόμενοι ὅταν ἀλῶσιν οἴκτιστόν εἰσι θεαμάτων, καὶ ἀποθνήσκοντες ἑαυτοὺς ἑοίκασι θρηνεῖν καὶ τρόπον τινὰ ἱκετεύειν, ὥσπερ οὖν ἄνθρωποι λησταῖς ἐντυχόντες ἀνοικτίστοις τε καὶ φονικωτάτοις. οἱ μὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν ἀποδιδράσκουν πειρώμενοι εἴτα τοῖς δικτύοις ἐμπαλάσσονται, ὑπεράλλεσθαι δὲ αὐτοὺς πειρωμένους τὸν λόχον εἴτα μέντοι καταλαμβάνει αἰχμή· οἱ δὲ ἀποδιδράσκοντες τόνδε τὸν θάνατον ἐς τὴν τέως

⁴³ Harker 2008: 135 interprets these events as Caracalla's suppression of a riot, reading the story of his recruitment of local youths as unconnected with the massacre itself. I am unconvinced by this interpretation: Caracalla's murder of the Alexandrian youths is reported by both Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*; Dio's apparent silence should not be taken as evidence that it never happened, since Xiphilinos is quite clear in his epitome of Caracalla's dealings with the Alexandrians that he does not tell us everything that transpired (ἵνα τὰς κατὰ μέρος συμφορὰς τὰς τότε κατασχούσας τὴν ἀθλίαν πόλιν παρῶ, 78.22.3). Regardless of the historicity of the event, Herodian's account is clear evidence that the story was circulating after 215 CE, and Aelian would therefore have known it.

⁴⁴ *NA* 1.37, 6.15, 11.40, and 16.39; *VH* 12.64.

πολεμίαν ἰχθύσι γῆν ἐξεπήδησαν, τὸ τέλος τοῦ βίου τὸ χωρὶς τοῦ ξίφους προηρημένοι καὶ μάλα ἀσμένως. (*NA* 12.44)

And *anthiai* that flail about when they are caught are the most pitiable of sights, and when they die, it is as if they sing themselves a lament and somehow beseech, just as men do when they fall in with the most pitiless, murderous brigands. For the ones that try to run away then become trapped in the nets, and the ones that try to leap over the ambush – the point of the spear gets them. And those that escape this death leap out onto the land, previously an enemy to fish, preferring to end their life apart from the sword, and this most gladly.

There was a long tradition of literary accounts of hunting the *anthias* that preceded Aelian.⁴⁵ But Aelian's narrative of the fish's death as a drama of resistance and escape from the clutches of the net is an innovation. Aelian elicits the reader's sympathies by transforming the fisherman's prey into heroes fighting against pitiless brigands and choosing a noble suicide rather than death by the sword of their enemy. Regardless of the precise date of composition of this chapter, and whatever Aelian's intentions may have been, anyone reading this chapter after 215 CE would, in sympathizing with the *anthiai*, have been drawn also into sympathizing with the butchered young men of Alexandria. The very name of the *anthias*, or "bloom-fish," suggests the youth of Caracalla's victims – compare Herodian's emphasis on their youth and on the presence of their parents and siblings.⁴⁶ Readers familiar with the tradition within which Aelian was writing would also know that the *anthiai* lack teeth and are therefore defenseless (στόμα τοῖσιν ὄπλον, *Opp. H.* 3.328), just like the young men of Alexandria at the moment of their death (ἀόπλους, *Hdn.* 4.9.6). Aelian himself, shortly before this chapter, motivates such an associative reading when, in didactic mode, he declares that, "fishing with nets . . . is like capturing an army and taking prisoners" (ἡ μὲν δικτυεῖα . . . ἔοικεν ἀλίσκομένῳ στρατοπέδῳ καὶ αἰρουμένοις αἰχμαλώτοις τισί, *NA* 12.40). Aelian's text thus may suggest the contemporary relevance of Egypt even when it is not talking about Egypt *per se*.

After this episode in Egypt, coins were struck depicting Caracalla wearing the cuirass of a conqueror, posing victoriously, lance in hand, with his right foot pressed down upon a crocodile, and receiving a shaft of grain from Isis on his right. The message is clear: Egypt subdued. One such coin was

⁴⁵ *Ov. Hal.* 45; *Plin. Nat.* 9.180 (cf. *Ael. NA* 13.17), 32.13; *Plu. Mor.* 977c–d; *Opp. H.* 1.248–258, 3.192, 205–337; and *Ath.* 282b (Ananios). On the identification of the *anthias* by comparison with the fish known as *aulopias*, *kallikthbus*, and *kalliönumos*, see Mair 1928: liii–lxi.

⁴⁶ *Hdn.* 4.9.5.

found in Rome itself, and the image would therefore have been a familiar one to Aelian.⁴⁷

India

Sources and representational qualities

In his impressive study of the formation of India within Greco-Roman thought, Grant Parker offers only brief discussions of Aelian, since, as he puts it, “it cannot be claimed that India stands at the middle of his writing.”⁴⁸ But India takes up as much textual space in the *NA* as does Egypt and is equally relevant to Aelian’s contemporary cultural milieu. Aelian’s most prominent named source for India is of course Ktesias of Knidos, after whom Aelian is indebted to a series of historians inspired by Alexander the Great’s expedition to India in 327/6 BCE.⁴⁹ These facts are not surprising, given that Ktesias and Alexander were responsible for forming much of the way the Greek and Roman worlds thought and wrote about India.⁵⁰ Snakes, monkeys, birds, and elephants dominate Aelian’s Indian chapters, as might be expected. But Aelian’s India is also populated by fantastical creatures that reinforce the characterization of India as a world of marvels. The reader encounters a series of unicorn-like creatures, as well as creatures resembling satyrs, huge winged scorpions, and a host of giant animals from both the land and sea.⁵¹ For Aelian, India is a place of maximal fecundity, nature outsized, a realm of the hypernatural.⁵²

Aelian also famously preserves Ktesias’ accounts of two hybrid creatures, the *grups* (4.28) and the *martikhoras* (4.22).⁵³ The chapter on the *martikhoras* is intriguing for Aelian’s remarks on the reliability of his source. The *martikhoras* has the body of a lion, the stinging tail of a scorpion, and a human face with three rows of teeth capable of devouring two or three men at a time. Aelian reports Ktesias’ claim to have seen this creature at

⁴⁷ See *CREBM* ccvi, Malaise 1972b: 242, and Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1938.

⁴⁸ Parker 2008: 78.

⁴⁹ Aristotle (2.34, 8.1, 9.20), Juba (9.58, 15.8, 16.15), Kleitarkhos (17.2, 17.22, 17.23, 17.25), Ktesias of Knidos (3.3, 4.22, 4.27, 4.28, 4.37, 4.42, 4.47, 4.53, 5.3, 16.2, 16.31, 16.37, 17.29), Megasthenes (8.7, 16.41, 17.37), Nikandros of Kolophon (9.20), Onesikritos (16.39, 17.6), Orthagoras (16.35, 17.6), and Polukleitos (16.41).

⁵⁰ See Romm 1992: 82–120 and Parker 2008: 28–65.

⁵¹ Unicorn-like creatures: *NA* 3.41, 4.53, 16.20; satyr-like creatures: 16.21; winged scorpions: 16.41; giant animals: 3.34, 5.3, 12.38, 15.21, 16.8, 16.11, 16.12, 16.13, 16.14, 16.22, 16.39, 17.6, 17.26.

⁵² On the anxiety about the hypernatural and hybridity projected onto India, see Koulakiotis 2008.

⁵³ Frs. 45h and 4545dβ Lenfant. See Parker 2008: 32–33, 122.

the court of the Persian king, “if,” he adds, “Ktesias is for anyone a sufficient voucher about such things” (εἰ δὴ τῷ ἱκανὸς τεκμηριῶσαι ὑπὲρ τῶν τοιούτων Κτησίας, *NA* 4.22, p. 82, line 6), adapting for his own purposes a line from Thucydides about the historical reliability of Homer.⁵⁴ This is Aelian the scholar at his most playful: the third-century writer of natural wonders cites a famous fifth-century BCE ethnographer, while quoting the consummate historian of the Classical period, himself citing the father of Greek *muthopoiësis*. The resulting effect is a sense of seemingly limitless literary deferral. At the same time, this passage offers a prime example of the constructed, discursive quality of Greco-Roman Indography (especially at its most fantastical) within the larger Greek literary tradition. All roads – even the long, exotic roads to India – lead back to Homer.⁵⁵ Far from being discredited for his account of the *martikhoras*, Ktesias is in fact all the more worthy of Aelian’s attention: “anyone at any rate who has heard the individual qualities of this creature, let him then indeed pay attention to the historian from Knidos” (ἀκούσας γε μὴν τὰ ἰδιά τις τοῦδε τοῦ ζώου εἴτα μέντοι τῷ συγγραφεῖ τῷ Κνιδίῳ προσεχέτω, lines 7–8). This fantastical aspect of Indography is in line with the paradoxographical tendencies of the *NA* generally.

Part of the aesthetic appeal of India for Aelian is the polychromatic, variegated quality of many of its animal inhabitants. I discussed the culturally significant chapter on the Indian peacock in [Chapter 4](#), but numerous other creatures are characterized by their decorative *poikilia*. The hybrid *grups*, for example, has skin “flowering” (διηρθίσθαι, *NA* 4.28, p. 83, line 29) with dark blue feathers. Indian cocks have combs that are not red, like those of Western cocks, but are “dappled like flowering garlands” (ποικίλον κατὰ τοὺς ἀνθινούς στεφάνους, 16.2, p. 380, line 1). Polukleitos is Aelian’s source for the polychromatic Indian lizards, whose skin “is amazingly dappled with flowery pigmentation” (βαφαῖς τισιν εὐανθέσι τὰς δορὰς πεποικίλθαι δεινῶς, 16.41). Some Indian snakes that Aelian finds in Kleitarkhos offer an ekphrastic challenge: “the appearance of their skin is dappled, as if they had been painted over with dyes, for some have copper colored bands that creep down from their head to their tail, and others are like silver, others have been made red, and some even glitter like gold” (ποικίλους γε μὴν τὴν χροάν ὀρθᾶσθαι, ὥσπερ οὖν φαρμάκοις καταγραφέντας· τοὺς μὲν γὰρ χαλκοειδεῖς ταινίας ἔχειν ἀπὸ κεφαλῆς ἐς τὴν οὐρὰν καθερπούσας, τοὺς δὲ ἀργυρίῳ προσεικασμένας, πεφοινιγμένας ἄλλους, καὶ μέντοι καὶ

⁵⁴ ὡς Ὅμηρος τοῦτο δεδήλωκεν, εἰ τῷ ἱκανὸς τεκμηριῶσαι, Th. 1.9.4.

⁵⁵ Cf. *VH* 12.48, and see Parker 2008: 106–107.

χρυσοφαῖς τινας, 17.2). Kleitarkhos is also the source for Aelian's elaborate description of the bird known as the *katreus*,⁵⁶ of surpassing beauty:

τὸ μέγεθος γὰρ εἶη ἂν πρὸς τὸν ταῶν, τὰ δὲ ἄκρα τῶν πτερῶν ἔοικε σμαράγδῳ. καὶ ὁρῶν μὲν ἄλλους οὐκ οἶδας οἷους ὀφθαλμοὺς ἔχει· εἰ δὲ εἰς σὲ ἀπίδοι, ἔρεῖς κινναβάρην εἶναι τὸ ὄμμα πλὴν τῆς κόρης· ἐκείνη δὲ μὴλῳ τὴν χροάν παρείκασται καὶ βλέπει ὀξύ. τό γε μὴν τοῖς ἀπάντων ὀφθαλμοῖς λευκόν, ἀλλὰ τοῖς τοῦ κατρέως τοῦδε ὡχρόν ἐστι. τὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς πτίλα γλαυκωπά, καὶ ἔχει ῥανίδας οἷονεῖ κρόκῳ παρεικασμένους εἶτα ἄλλην ἄλλην διεσπαρμένους. πόδες δὲ αὐτῷ σανδαράκινοι. (*NA* 17.23)

For its size would be like the peacock, but the tips of its feathers are like emerald. And when it looks at others,⁵⁷ you do not know what sort of eyes it has. But if it should look in your direction, you will say that its eye is cinnabar except for its pupil, and that is like an apple in color and has a sharp glance. Nevertheless, there is a part of the eyes in all creatures that is white, but in the eyes of this *katreus* it is yellow. The feathers of its head are bluish grey, and it has spots that look like saffron distributed here and there. And its feet are orange.

These descriptions obviously have much in common with the variegated literary aesthetic that characterizes Aelian's work. It will be remembered that in the epilogue of the *NA* Aelian employs the same language and imagery to describe the organizational variation of his book as a means of enticing his readers: "I thought I should weave and intertwine this collection like a meadow or garland in bloom with polychromatic variety, the many animals acting like flower-bearers" (*NA* ep., p. 431, lines 9–12). Along with the other potentially contradictory connotations (versatile, Protean, unstable, undisciplined, effeminate) that Aelian's literary *poikilia* would have had for his readers, the style would also have connoted the language and imagery of Indian exotica.

The relationship between animals and language is also a recurring theme in the Indian chapters of the *NA*. Consider the story of the elephant named Nikaia that was entrusted to look after the infant child of her trainer's wife, who gave the animal instructions "in the language of the Indians, to which elephants respond" (φωνῇ τῇ Ἰνδῶν, ἧς ἀκούουσιν ἐλέφαντες, *NA* 11.14). Aelian is careful to tell us that this took place when Antigonos II Gonatas was besieging Megara, during the Chremonidean war between Macedonia

⁵⁶ On the *katreus*, see Vian 1988.

⁵⁷ Hercher's emendation (ὁρῶντος μὲν ἄλλοσε) is attractive, but GLR are right to print ὁρῶν μὲν ἄλλους, the reading found in all the manuscripts but one (A). The phrase should be a genitive absolute or some other such subordinating construction, but Aelian elsewhere commits the same grammatical infelicity, cf. παῖς δ' ἔτι οὔσα, γίνεται αὐτῇ κατὰ τοῦ προσώπου φῦμα ὑπ' αὐτὸ τὸ γένειον, *VH* 12.1.

and the Greek states (267–261 BCE). A linguistic breakthrough regarding elephants came in Egypt during the reign of Antigonos' contemporary, Ptolemaios II Philadelphos, who was given as a gift a baby elephant that “was raised in the Greek language and understood those who spoke it. But it had been believed before this animal that elephants understood only the language of the Indians” (τῇ φωνῇ ἀνετράφη τῇ Ἑλλάδι, καὶ λαλούντων συνίει. ἐπεπίστευτο δὲ πρὸ τοῦδε τοῦ ζώου τῆς Ἰνδῶν μόνης φωνῆς ἐπαῖνιν τοὺς ἐλέφαντας, 11.25).⁵⁸ The paradoxographical element of both these passages is not just the blurring of the line between animal and human (i.e., that an elephant can understand human language) but also the intense cultural blending (Indian, Greek, Egyptian, Macedonian) that arose in the wake of Alexander's conquests. This cultural blending was at its most uncanny when it was seen not in humans, the proper agents of culture, but in their animal counterparts.

But elephants are not the only Indian animals distinguished by their relationship with human language. Aelian informs us that many Indian birds “speak with their tongue like a man” (τῇ γλώττῃ φθέγγεται δίκην ἀνθρώπου, *NA* 1.19).⁵⁹ Remarkable in this respect are the birds known as *sittakoi* (also known as *psittakoi*): “all of these, having learned like children, thus also themselves become talkative and they speak with a human voice” (οἱ πάντες δὲ οὗτοι μαθόντες ὡς παῖδες, οὕτως καὶ αὐτοὶ γίνονται λάλοι καὶ φθέγγονται φθέγμα ἀνθρωπικόν, 16.2). Without exposure to the sounds of human language, however, the *sittakoi* lack the faculty of speech: “But in the woods they emit the sound of birds, and they do not produce clear, eloquent language, but they are untaught and not at all talkative” (ἐν δὲ ταῖς ὕλαις ὀρνίθων μὲν ἀφιᾶσιν ἦχον, φωνὴν δὲ εὐσημόν τε καὶ εὖστομον οὐ προῖενται, ἀλλ' εἰσὶν ἀμαθεῖς καὶ οὐπω λάλοι). The bird known as the *kerkiôn*, which Aelian introduces in the following chapter, “is, when it has been taught human language, more talkative and more naturally clever than the *sittakoi*” (μουσωθὲν ἀνθρώπου φωνὴν εἶτα μέντοι τῶν σιττακῶν ἐστί λαλίστερόν τε καὶ θυμοσοφώτερον, 16.3). Aelian could well have summoned Stoic arguments denying the meaningfulness of the vocalization of birds,⁶⁰ but he instead emphasizes that such vocalization is a learned skill, and the simile likening birds to human children strongly suggests

⁵⁸ I retain Hercher's emendation (ἐλέφαντας) as preferable to the reading of the manuscripts (ἐλάφους): Aelian is clear at *NA* 11.14 that elephants (not deer) were able to understand the Indian language.

⁵⁹ Cf. Arist. *PA* 660a35. See Dierauer 1977: 126–128.

⁶⁰ Cf. Philo of Alexandria, *On Animals* 98 (Terian) and D.L. 7.55. See Tabarroni 1988 and Sorabji 1993: 80–86. On the topic of animals and speech in Greek literature before the Stoics, see Heath 2005.

an anti-Stoic position.⁶¹ But in a surprising reversal, Aelian then suggests that birds might be better off without human language. The *kerkiôn*, he explains, refuses to be merely the plaything of its human instructor: “it does not kindly submit to being raised by humans, but, from a longing for liberty and from a desire for the freedom of expression of its own brood, it welcomes famine rather than slavery with food” (οὐ μὴν τὴν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τροφήν ἡδέως ὑπομένει, ἀλλὰ ἐλευθερίας πόθῳ καὶ παρρησίας τῆς κατὰ τὴν συντροφίαν ἐπιθυμίας ἀσπάζεται λιμὸν μᾶλλον ἢ δουλείαν μετὰ τρυφῆς). Human speech, then, far from being an inherently advantageous acquisition for the bird, is rather a sign of enslavement and the loss of its freedom. Moreover, the bird’s “desire for the freedom of expression of its own brood” suggests contemporary anti-Stoic philosophical arguments that animals possess their own language that humans are merely incapable of understanding.⁶²

A further interesting case is that of the Indian *kunokephaloi*, who seem to possess all of the attributes of human civilization *except* language.⁶³ Though they have the head of a dog, “the rest of them is human, and they walk about dressed in the skins of wild beasts. And they are just, and they don’t hurt anyone, and they speak not a thing, but howl; nevertheless, the language of the Indians they understand” (τὰ δὲ ἄλλα ἀνθρώπων ἔχουσι, καὶ ἡμφιεσμένοι βαδίζουσι δορὰς θηρίων. καὶ εἰσι δίκαιοι, καὶ ἀνθρώπων λυποῦσιν οὐδένα, καὶ φθέγγονται μὲν οὐδέν, ὠρύονται δέ, τῆς γε μὴν ἰνδῶν φωνῆς ἐπαῖουσι, 4.47). The *kunokephaloi* therefore seem to occupy a liminal space in the conceptual framework dividing human from animal.⁶⁴ And yet their inclusion within Aelian’s book is clearly the result of the author’s critical decision: “I have made mention of them among the irrational creatures, and reasonably so, for they do not possess articulate, clear, human speech” (μνήμην δὲ αὐτῶν ἐν τοῖς ἀλόγοις ἐποίησάμην, καὶ εἰκότως ἔναρθρον γὰρ καὶ εὔσημον καὶ ἀνθρωπίνην φωνὴν οὐκ ἔχουσιν). Aelian here echoes Stoic doctrine concerning the meaninglessness of animal voices,⁶⁵ while at the same time reinforcing cultural and racial prejudices against barbarians. But elsewhere in the *NA*, the possession of “articulate, clear, human speech” is, of course, not the sole factor determining also the possession of *logos* in any given species. The *sittakos* and *kerkiôn* birds are capable of replicating human speech, but that obviously does not privilege them with reason and bar them from inclusion

⁶¹ Cf. Plutarch, *On the Cleverness of Animals* 972f–973e, *On the Eating of Flesh* 994e; S.E. *P.* 1.62–67, 72–76. See also Newmyer 2006: 46–47, 62, 72, 94, 96.

⁶² Plu. *On the Eating of Flesh* 994e; S.E. *P.* 1.72–76; Porph. *Abst.* 3.2–4. Cf. Aelian *NA* 5.51.

⁶³ See Romm 1992: 77–81 and 1996. ⁶⁴ Cf. Agamben 2004: 33–38. ⁶⁵ D.L. 7.55.

among the *aloga* of Aelian's book. On the contrary, given Aelian's generally pessimistic view of human civilization, it might paradoxically be deemed more of a privilege to be ranked among the idealized "irrational creatures" that live in harmony with nature without the need or trouble of human language (or *logos*). Read in conjunction with the chapters on the Indian birds and elephants, Aelian's contradictorily Stoic pose in this passage on the *kunokephaloi* challenges readers to recognize the arbitrariness with which humans make the conceptual divisions that privilege themselves over their animal counterparts.⁶⁶ India offers itself as the ideal imaginative space within which to conduct such conceptual experimentation and to blur the lines between human and animal, not to mention the lines between Roman, Greek, and other.

Contemporary relevance

The enthusiasm for Alexander the Great among the Severan emperors would obviously have been relevant to Aelian's literary exploration of Indian fauna. So great was Septimius Severus' reverence for the Macedonian leader, according to Dio, that when the emperor visited Egypt, he locked up the tomb of Alexander, so that no one would any longer be able to look upon his body (76.13.2). Caracalla's adoration of Alexander the Great was so intense, "that he even used certain weapons and cups in the belief that they had belonged to the famous man, and he furthermore even set up many statues of him both in the camps and in Rome itself" (ὥστε καὶ ὄπλοις τισὶ καὶ ποτηρίοις ὡς καὶ ἐκείνου γεγονόσι χρῆσθαι, καὶ προσέτι καὶ εἰκόνας αὐτοῦ πολλὰς καὶ ἐν τοῖς στρατοπέδοις καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ Ῥώμῃ στήσαι, 78.7.1).⁶⁷ It was not enough to grant his hero the Roman appellation "the Augustus of the East" (ἐξὸν Αὐγουστον, 78.7.2), for he also wrote to the senate that the spirit of Alexander had entered his own body to live again, after having lived such a short life the first time. Herodian confirms this mania when he says that, after his journey along the Danube in 212 CE, Caracalla proceeded to the border of Macedonia, where "he straightaway *was* Alexander" (εὐθὺς Ἀλέξανδρος ἦν, 4.8.1). Herodian also mentions the elaborate statuary, adding that, "in some places we even saw images worthy of a joke: in depictions of a single body, on a single round head, two half-faces, one belonging to Alexander, the other belonging to Antoninus" (ἔσθ' ὅπου δὲ καὶ χλεῦης εἶδομεν ἄξίας

⁶⁶ Cf. Porph. *Abst.* 3.2–4, with commentary by Sorabji 1993: 80–86.

⁶⁷ See also SHA *Caracalla* 2.1–2.

εἰκόνας, ἐν γραφαῖς ἑνὸς σώματος ὑπὸ περιφερείᾳ κεφαλῆς μιᾶς ὄψεως ἡμιτόμους δύο, Ἀλεξάνδρου τε καὶ Ἀντωνίνου, 4.8.2). Caracalla went so far as to persecute Aristotelian philosophers, in the belief that Aristotle had been an accomplice in Alexander's death (D.C. 78.7.3) – this persecution would certainly not have endeared Caracalla to a writer like Aelian. Alexander's association with India was a prominent feature of Caracalla's impersonation of the hero: "by Zeus, he even led about with himself many elephants, so that even in this he might appear to imitate Alexander, but he was more like Dionysus" (νῆ Δία καὶ ἐλέφαντας πολλοὺς συμπεριήγετο, ὅπως καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον, μᾶλλον δὲ Διόνυσον, μιμεῖσθαι δόξη, 78.7.4).

Given the contemporary craze for Alexander the Great, the Indian phases of the *NA* would have found an enthusiastic readership in Severan Rome, especially those chapters in which Alexander himself appears, conceived by Aelian as a sympathetic witness to the natural world. In the important chapter on the peacock Aelian writes that, "Alexander the Macedonian, when he saw these birds in India, was astonished, and in wonder at its beauty he threatened the person sacrificing the peacock with most severe threats" (*NA* 5.21, see [Chapter 4](#)). At the beginning of Book 8, Aelian describes how the Indians presented Alexander with the spectacle of a special breed of tiger-dog pitted against a lion: the dog bit into its adversary and refused to release its jaws even after its tail and legs were cut off. When the dog's head was finally severed from its body, "Alexander was at this point grieved (ἡνιάτο), astonished (ἐκπλαγείς) at the dog because indeed while giving a trial of itself it had then died, its disposition opposite to that of cowards, and it met its death because of its courage" (8.1). In another chapter, Aelian recounts how the Indians successfully persuaded Alexander not to harm a giant sacred snake that dwelt in a local cave. But when the army passed by the creature's cave, it perceived them, stuck its head out, and "let out a hissing breath so great as to astonish (ἐκπλήξει) everyone and throw them into confusion" (15.21), for it was said to measure seventy cubits and its eyes were as big as a large Macedonian shield. Then there were the two giant snakes raised by the Indian Abisares, which, Onesikritos says, "Alexander had an exceeding desire to see" (ἐπιθυμῆσαι δεινῶς Ἀλέξανδρον θεάσασθαι, 16.39). Finally, Aelian reports that in the mountainous regions of India, there are monkeys that grow so big that, according to Kleitarkhos, when Alexander encountered them, he "became very frightened (πάνυ καταπλαγῆναι), together with his troops too, thinking that having seen them crowded together he was looking upon an army that had been assembled and was lying in wait for him" (17.25). One notes the passive experience of

astonishment as a recurring motif in Aelian's stories of the Indian Alexander. Just as Caracalla appropriated the figure of Alexander as the role model for his own imperial dreams,⁶⁸ so too does Aelian appropriate Alexander and mold him in his own image as an intellectual with a passionate desire not to kill or hunt, but to learn about the nature of animals and, indeed, their virtues.⁶⁹

But Aelian's India, for as much as it inspires wonder, is in some ways also characterized by its uncanny familiarity, and in several chapters it seems as if, whatever the validity of his sources, Aelian is drawn to his material precisely because it offers a literary prism through which to view the culturally familiar as only slightly defamiliarized by its Indian setting. I have in mind especially Aelian's accounts of the animal spectacles and the chariot races staged by the Indian king. One day every year, the Indian king offers contests (ἄγωνίας, *NA* 15.15)⁷⁰ among a variety of horned animals, including wild bulls, tame rams, single-horned asses, and animals called *mesoi* and *huainai*. All these, Aelian writes, "by means of some wondrous nature compete until victory, just like athletes or those who exert their strength for the greatest prizes or for solemn glory and a noble reputation." But after the aforementioned creatures have given their show, the elephants themselves enter the arena as *agônistai*: "these advance wounding each other even to the point of death by means of their horns, and sometimes one overpowers and kills his opponent, but sometimes even the both of them die together." In these annual animal death matches in India we are surely invited to see a projection of Rome's gladiatorial shows, with which the author and his readers would have been familiar. These are not just animal spectacles like the Roman *venationes*; Aelian's animal competitors in India are all armed, as it were, with horns (*kerata*), the swords that nature has given them.

In his chapter on the Indian chariot races, Aelian focuses his attention more on the human spectators and participants: "And indeed the Indians are enthusiastically dedicated to their racing oxen" (*NA* 15.24). Aelian's ethnographic pose finds its parallel in a passage from Josephus, whose own ethnographic gaze is fixed not on India, but on Rome itself, where "there were chariot races, for this spectacle is fanatically pursued among the

⁶⁸ Cf. Parker 2008: 247–250.

⁶⁹ Cf. *NA* Epilogue, p. 431, lines 12–15.

⁷⁰ The word has a literary flavor: while it is the term preferred by Philostratus (*VA* 3.31.7, 5.8.8, 6.10.24, 8.18.15; *VS* 554.6; *Her.* 678.11; *Gym. passim*), epigraphic evidence refers to such contests in the East as *agônes*. The one instance of *agônia* in an inscription commemorating an athletic contest is *IG* II² 3114, from Attica, where the word is convenient for the iambic meter. I thank the anonymous reader for this observation.

Romans, and they eagerly assemble in the hippodrome” (*AJ* 19.24.1). The Indian chariot races therefore offer Aelian an opportunity for commentary on the fanaticism of the Roman hippodrome: “And both the king himself and many of the nobles contend over the swiftness of those [animals], and they make high wagers in gold and silver, and they do not think it disgraceful to vie over these creatures, but they yoke them together in fact and gamble on victory” (*NA* 15.24). Aelian explains that the cattle are not yoked together in pairs, but that each ox is harnessed alongside a pair of horses, so that each charioteer must drive a team of three. The conclusion to this episode is especially fascinating:

ἐάν δέ ποτε ὁ βασιλεὺς πρὸς τινὰ ὑπὲρ τῶν ἑαυτοῦ βοῶν σύνθηται, εἰς τοσαύτην προχωρεῖ φιλονεικίαν, ὥς αὐτὸς ἐφ’ ἄρματος ἔπρεσθαι, καὶ παρορμαῖν τὸν ἡνίοχον. ὁ δὲ ἄρα τοὺς μὲν ἵππους ἐξαιμάττει τῷ κέντρῳ, τῶν δὲ βοῶν τὴν χεῖρα ἀνέχει· ἀκέντητοι γὰρ θεοῦσι. τοσαύτη δέ ἐστι περὶ τὴν βοεικὴν ἀμιλλαν ἢ φιλοτιμία, ὥς μὴ μόνους τοὺς πλουσίους ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἐπὶ πολλῶ φιλονεικεῖν μηδὲ τοὺς δεσπότας ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς θεωμένους, οἷα δήπου καὶ ὁ Ἰδομενεὺς ὁ Κρήης καὶ ὁ Λοκρὸς Αἴας παρὰ τῷ Ὀμήρῳ φιλονεικοῦντες ἀποδείκνυσθον. (*NA* 15.24)

And if the king ever bets with someone on his own oxen, he becomes so desirous of victory that he himself follows in a chariot and urges on the charioteer. And he for his part bloodies his horses with his whip, but he doesn’t lay a hand on the oxen, for they run without the need of the whip. And so great is the rivalry for the competition of the oxen, that not only the wealthy and their masters contend over them for high stakes, but so too do the spectators, just as, I suppose, Cretan Idomeneus and Lokrian Ajax are shown competing in Homer.

In India, just as in Rome, the madness for the races infects all strata of society, and the depiction of the firsthand involvement of the Indian king reflects the zealous involvement of the Severan *Augusti* themselves in the chariot races of the hippodrome. Herodian reports, for example, that when the people jeered at his favorite charioteer, Caracalla ordered the arrest of all the culprits, resulting in the guards’ indiscriminate arrest and murder of countless spectators. Only those who could pay their own ransom to the guards were set free.⁷¹ The same historian suggests that Caracalla’s rivalry with Geta might even have been the result of their sporting rivalry in boyhood.⁷² Elagabalus’ own participation in the races and his attachment to certain charioteers, apparently as erotic as it was sporting, are well known.⁷³ Aelian’s reference to Homer at the end of the chapter is a universalizing

⁷¹ Hdn. 4.6.4–5.

⁷² Hdn. 3.10.3–4.

⁷³ D.C. 80.14.2–16.6.

gesture, linking the seemingly questionable enthusiasm for the chariot races among the Indians (and, by extension, the Romans) with a noble Greek past.⁷⁴

Depictions of India were relevant to the religious culture of Severan Rome as well, which is shown in Aelian's treatment of the story of the Indian prince transformed into a hoopoe. Aelian begins the narrative by contrasting the behavior of kings in Greece and India. Greek kings prize a horse's bit and raiment, but Indian kings delight in the hoopoe. Cultural difference is therefore the frame within which Aelian asks the reader to consider the Brahmin myth that follows.

παῖς ἐγένετο Ἰνδῶν βασιλεῖ, καὶ ἀδελφούς εἶχεν, οἵπερ οὖν ἀνδρωθέν-
τες ἐκδικώτατοί τε γίνονται καὶ λεωργότατοι. καὶ τούτου μὲν ὡς νεωτά-
του καταφρονοῦσι, τὸν δὲ πατέρα ἐκερτόμουν καὶ τὴν μητέρα, τὸ γῆρας
αὐτῶν ἐκφαυλίσαντες. ἀναίνονται οὖν ἐκεῖνοι τὴν σὺν τούτοις διατριβήν,
καὶ ᾤχοντο φεύγοντες ὃ τε παῖς καὶ οἱ γέροντες. (*NA* 16.5, p. 381,
lines 4–10)

A prince was born to the king of the Indians, and he had brothers who, when they became men, were most lawless and villainous. And they disdained the prince for being so young, and they sneered at their father and mother, disparaging their old age. The boy and his aged parents therefore refused to spend any more time with them and they went into exile.

The myth starts out as a family drama in which those at the two extreme stages of life (youth and old age) are victimized by arrogant sons in their prime. The behavior of the wicked princes is typical of the human behavior censured by Aelian throughout the *NA* and contrasted time and again with the idealized behavior of animals. The elderly parents cannot, however, endure their journey into exile and they die, at which point the young prince demonstrates his filial piety: “he did not neglect them, but buried them in himself, making an incision in his head with his sword” (ὁ δὲ παῖς οὐκ ὀλιγώρησεν αὐτῶν, ἀλλ’ ἔθαψεν αὐτοὺς ἐν ἑαυτῷ, ξίφει τὴν κεφαλὴν διατεμών, lines 11–12). With this surreal detail, the narrative enters the realm of the divine, and Aelian once again reminds us of the Brahmin source of the myth:

ἀγασθέντα δὲ τὸν πάντ’ ἐφορῶντα Ἥλιον οἱ αὐτοὶ φασὶ τῆς εὐσεβείας τὴν
ὑπερβολήν, ὅρην αὐτὸν ἀποφῆναι, κάλλιστον μὲν ὄψει, μακραιώνα δὲ τὸν
βίον· ὑπανέστηκε δὲ οἱ καὶ λόφος ἐκ τῆς κορυφῆς, οἷονεὶ μνημεῖον τοῦτο
τῶν πεπραγμένων ὅτε ἐφευγεν. (lines 13–16)

⁷⁴ On the moral flexibility of the athletic anecdote in Aelian's *VH*, see König 2007b: 144.

And the same people say that Helios, who looks upon all things, admiring his excessive piety, turned him into a bird, the most beautiful to look at, and with a long life. And a crest even rose up out of his head, this as a reminder of what he did when he was in exile.

Aelian's reference to the Indian solar cult has numerous parallels in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*.⁷⁵ By attributing the Indian prince's metamorphosis to Helios "who looks upon all things," Aelian participates in the contemporary trend of representing the supremacy of Helios in Indian religious thought.

It has, however, been duly recognized that Philostratus' utopic depiction of India is drawn according to Hellenic ideals,⁷⁶ and John Morgan has suggested that the Indian cult of Helios in the *Life of Apollonios of Tyana* is an instance of "transferred discourse."⁷⁷ According to Morgan's model, Philostratus displaces contemporary religious interest in the cult of Helios to a mythical realm in a part of the world believed to be close to the sun. Contemporary interest in Helios was of course intensified by Julia Domna's close family ties to the cult of Sol Elagabal at Emesa, whether or not the empress herself actively promoted that interest (see Chapter 6).⁷⁸ But incorporation of the Emesan cult into mainstream Greco-Roman culture was not an easy or straightforward affair, as evidenced by the outrage and ultimately the violence inspired by the young emperor Elagabalus' introduction, or rather imposition, of the sun god into Roman civic life. Julia Domna's well-known philhellenism and her commission of the *Life of Apollonios of Tyana* suggests an accommodating, assimilationist strategy rather more nuanced than Elagabalus' politically unsophisticated imposition of the Emesan cult in Rome. According to Morgan, the attraction of Apollonios of Tyana to those with a vested interest in the Emesan sun cult "was precisely that he allowed Sun-worship to be associated with Hellenism; his very name encapsulates the combination."⁷⁹ Further evidence are coins, struck during the reign of Elagabalus, that commemorate athletic competitions at Emesa with the legend ἡλιὰ πύθια, a phrase that can only be translated awkwardly into something like "Helian Pythian Games" or "Games of Helios, in the manner of the Games of Pythian Apollo."⁸⁰ Though there are no fewer than eighty-seven references to games "ranking with the Pythian games" (*isoputhia*) on inscriptions from Asia Minor, none of these draw explicitly on the association with Helios, as do the ἡλιὰ πύθια

⁷⁵ Philostr. *VA* 2.24.1, 2.28.1, 3.14.1–3, 3.15.1–2, 3.48.1, and 6.11.20. ⁷⁶ Parker 2008: 288–294.

⁷⁷ Morgan 2009: 277. ⁷⁸ Levick 2007: 14–17. ⁷⁹ Morgan 2009: 279.

⁸⁰ *Greek Coins in the British Museum*, Syria, Emesa, no. 21.

of Emesa. “This is,” writes Morgan, “both an obvious move to assimilate the cult to that of Delphic Apollo, and at the same time to relocate and to annex the centrality of Hellenism.”⁸¹

This is, I argue, the same strategy that Aelian is playing in his retelling of the Brahmin myth of the Indian prince. My argument is based not just on the central reference to Helios, but on Aelian’s overall emphasis on the translation of myth through time and across cultures. After telling how the prince was transformed into the hoopoe, Aelian explains that, “some such things even the Athenians, talking marvels about the lark, applied to a myth that I think in fact the comic poet Aristophanes followed in the *Birds*” (*NA* 16.5, p. 381, lines 17–19). Aelian then even quotes the relevant verses from the *Birds*⁸² before concluding, “It seems therefore that from the Indians the mythical narrative, applied to a different bird, flowed (ἐπιρρεῦσαι) in fact also to the Greeks. For it was an Ogygian length of time, say the Brahmins (Ὡγύγιον γὰρ τι μῆκος χρόνου λέγουσι Βραχμᾶνες), since these things were performed for his parents by the Indian hoopoe when he was still a human boy” (p. 381, line 26–p. 382, line 2).

Aelian’s point therefore has been not just to narrate the Brahmin myth, but also to demonstrate the spread of the myth from East to West. Aelian uses the verb “flow” (ἐπιρρεῦσαι), and the liquid metaphor evokes the ever-changing, incessantly surging power of myth, much like the *carmen perpetuum* of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.⁸³ Interestingly, though, Aelian suggests that the flow of myth is multi-directional, as he represents in almost chiasmic fashion the Athenians perpetuating an Indian myth while the Brahmins refer to the myth of the primordial Attic king Ogyges.⁸⁴ While the central agency of Helios in Aelian’s passage evokes contemporary interest in the Emesan sun cult, the additional statement about the cultural transference of myth perfectly illustrates what Morgan has described as the attempt “to relocate and to annex the centrality of Hellenism.” Aelian’s notice of the Indian myth therefore should be read not as a sterile, refurbished relic from the library, but as a creative re-writing engaged with contemporary concerns regarding the assimilation of non-Greek beliefs within Hellenism.

Conclusion

Aelian grants equal space in the *NA* to depictions of Egypt and India without explicitly favoring one over the other on ideological or philosophical

⁸¹ Morgan 2009: 269. ⁸² Ar. *Av.* 471–475. ⁸³ Ov. *Met.* 1.4.

⁸⁴ Eus. *PE* 10.10.7, quoting a passage from Book 3 of the *Chronographia* of Julius Africanus.

grounds. In addition to more traditional literary sources, Aelian claims firsthand information from genuine Egyptian sources that were likely both literary and non-literary, i.e. conversations with personal acquaintances as well as inspection of Egyptian or Egyptianizing art in Rome and Praeneste. Aelian's depictions of Egypt are for the most part traditional and he is especially interested in the role of animals in Egyptian religion. Aelian's relatively positive attitude towards Egyptian animal worship is remarkable, as it avoids the outright disdain of the Roman tradition and hearkens back instead to the eager curiosity of Herodotus. Aelian even challenges Greco-Roman readers to rethink the basis upon which they assume a position of cultural superiority.

Aelian has been criticized for his methodological inconsistency, but he presents the mass of conflicting stories and beliefs among the Egyptians as having its own interest and literary value. Aelian's Egyptography is in literary terms, then, a further elaboration of the *poikilia* with which he styles the whole of the *NA*. Aelian's Egyptography was very much a product of the literary and religious culture in Rome in the first quarter of the third century CE. There is, however, insufficient evidence to support the claim that Aelian was a priest of Isis, nor should Aelian's enthusiasm for Egyptian culture be seen as a sign of his support for Caracalla.

Aelian's sources for his chapters on India were Ktesias of Knidos and a series of historians of Alexander the Great. Snakes, monkeys, birds, and elephants predominate in Aelian's Indian chapters, as might be expected, and fantastical creatures reinforce the traditional characterization of India as a world of marvels. Part of the aesthetic appeal of India for Aelian is the polychromatic, variegated quality of many of its animal inhabitants, suggesting a strong association between literary *poikilia* and the imagery of Indian exotica. Aelian is also interested in the capacity for speech in certain species of animal from India. Read in conjunction with the chapters on the Indian birds and elephants, Aelian's contradictorily Stoic pose in the passage on the *kunokephaloi* challenges readers to recognize the arbitrariness with which humans make the conceptual divisions that privilege themselves not only over their animal counterparts, but also over barbarians.

The popularity of Indian stories in the early third century is tied to the figure of Alexander the Great, who served as a role model for both Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla. Within the *NA*, however, Aelian shapes Alexander in his own image, characterized by his curiosity and wonder at the natural world. Aelian's India can also be read as an uncanny mirror for contemporary Roman culture, with some chapters even evoking

Rome's "strange" fascination with the violence of the arena and the mania for the chariot races of the hippodrome. Finally, in the Brahmin myth of the Indian boy transformed into a hoopoe through the intervention of Helios, Aelian engages in the symbolic translation of foreign religious cults and traditions by an all-embracing imperial Greek culture.

The sexual animal

Erôs features prominently in the *NA*. One would expect, of course, to read in this book the descriptions of animal mating habits typical of natural histories, whereas *erôs* is associated more with the sphere of human experience.¹ Nevertheless, *erôs* is a regular ingredient in Aelian's scholarly compendium. But Aelian is throughout the *NA* motivated not by a desire to offer a scientific display of animal behavior, but to use literary representations of animals as a means of moral commentary on human society. With the human orientation of the *NA* in mind, it is perhaps not incredible after all that an *erôs* more often associated with humans would play such a prominent role in Aelian's representations of the animal world: *erôs* structures social behavior, often presents ethical and philosophical problems, and, finally, titillates and entertains. Aelian is clearly interested in the *erôs* of humans and human fascination with *erôs* just as much as he is interested in the putative *erôs* of animals.

Of the 792 entries in the *NA*, 111 (or 14%) discuss sex or *erôs*.² These entries treat three general topics, with several topics sometimes overlapping in a single entry. First, Aelian is most frequently concerned with the morality of sexual behavior in animals, centered around the themes of self-control and the lack thereof. Second, there is a recurring interest in the gendering of certain sexual behaviors. Within a given species male and female partners are each expected to act in certain ways, both leading up to and during sexual intercourse, but Aelian has a keen interest in those animals that transgress such normative sexual behaviors. The final section of this chapter will deal with Aelian's fascination with interspecies

¹ On *erôs* as an exclusively human emotion, see Konstan 2012.

² These are: 1.2, 6, 11–13, 23–25, 37–38, 44, 50, 57; 2.3, 6, 10, 43; 3.5, 9, 16–17, 42, 44, 46–47; 4.1–2, 5–9, 12, 17, 32, 56–58; 5.11, 29; 6.1, 15, 17, 27–29, 34, 39, 42, 44, 60, 63; 7.15, 17, 19, 22, 24, 39; 8.1, 4, 10, 16, 19–21; 9.13, 21, 26, 36, 44, 48, 54, 63, 66; 10.1–2, 14, 27, 29, 33, 47–48; 11.3, 15–16, 18, 34; 12.10, 16, 34, 36, 41; 13.12, 15, 27; 14.5, 18, 28; 15.9, 11, 14, 19, 23, 25; 16.9, 20, 24, 27; 17.22, 44.

eroticism, with a special focus on those narratives depicting erotic relationships between humans and animals.

Sex and morality

The theme of sexual continence and incontinence appears early and often in the *NA*. Already in the second chapter of the collection Aelian introduces the themes: the *skaros* “is the most lustful of all fish, and its insatiable desire for the female becomes the cause of its capture” (λαγνίστατος δὲ ἄρα ἰχθύων ἀπάντων ἦν, καὶ ἡ γε πρὸς τὸ θῆλυ ἀκόρεστος ἐπιθυμία αὐτῷ ἀλώσεως αἰτία γίνεται, *NA* 1.2). Aelian describes how fishermen use the female *skaros* as bait to attract a crowd of male fish, but he transforms the scene of hunting into a familiar scene of human courtship: “Accordingly the males, just like young men when they have seen an amorous bride, are both stung to a frenzy and run after her, and each one strives to outpace the other, to get close to her, and to touch her lightly, just like men who are madly in love when they hunt for a kiss or a scratch or some other of love’s stolen prizes” (οὐκοῦν οἱ ἄρρενες, ὥσπερ οὖν νύμφην ἐρωτικὴν νεανίαί θεασάμενοι, οἰστροῦνται τε καὶ μεταθέουσι, καὶ ἐπείγονται φθάσαι ἄλλος ἄλλον καὶ γενέσθαι πλησίον καὶ παραψαῦσαι, ὥσπερ οὖν δυσέρωτες ἄνθρωποι φίλημα ἢ κνίσμα θηρώμενοι ἢ τι ἄλλο κλέμμα ἐρωτικόν). The erotic fish hunting for a kiss are ironically also the hunted, and it is precisely their erotic impulse that becomes for them the cause of their destruction. Comparison with Oppian’s *Halieutika*, Aelian’s probable source for this passage, is enlightening. Whereas Oppian uses simile to transform the contending fish into Homeric athletes striving in a footrace, eager for the sweet prize of victory (*H.* 4.101–106), Aelian by contrast, whose interest here is clearly on *erôs* and its effects, turns instead to erotic imagery drawn from new comedy or Greek romance.³

But far from celebrating love, this scene is an indictment of the power of Aphrodite, equally destructive in the animal as in the human realm: “Accordingly, when they have streamed in together, they are caught, and this is the penalty that the *skaroi* pay for their erotic onrush” (οὐκοῦν συνεισρέυσαντες ἐαλώκασι, καὶ διδόασι δίκην ὁρμῆς ἀφροδισίου ταύτην

³ Cf. Aelian’s note that “the *kunocephaloi* are both mad for virgins and indeed use force more than Menander’s young teenage boys who are unable to control themselves at the all-night festivals” (ἤκουσα δὲ κυνοκεφάλους καὶ παρθένους ἐπιμανῆναι καὶ μέντοι καὶ βιάσασθαι ὑπὲρ τὰ μικρὰ μεράκια τὰ τοῦ Μενάνδρου τὰ ἐν ταῖς παννυχίσιν ἀκόλαστα, 7.19 [*PCG* VI 2, test. 124]). Scholfield notes that, “No comedy of Menander of the name of Παννυχίς(-ιδες) is known; the reference is presumably general” (1959a: 129). For erotic rivalry over another man’s wife in Greek romance, see esp. Chariton 1.2–4.

οἱ σκάροι, *NA* 1.2). Aelian's first essay on love in the natural world focuses on the violence of *erôs*. The young men of the simile are "stung to madness" (οἰστροῦνται); Aelian says that they strive to lay their hands lightly (παρὰψαῦσαι) upon the girl, but that "light" touch is threatening enough to provoke the girl's defensive scratching (κνίσμα), thought by her pursuers to be just as good as a kiss; and their quarry is described as a νύμφην ἑρωτικὴν, which could mean just a girl of marriageable age or even that the young woman is already joined in erotic matrimony to another man. Aelian allows for the interpretation that the *skaroi* are not, therefore, merely the innocent victims of a fisherman's ploy, but the frenzied young rapists of another man's wife, and there is justice in the penalty that they pay (διδόσι δίκην). In this seemingly programmatic essay on *erôs* in the natural world,⁴ Aelian appears to echo the contemporary moral authority of Roman Stoicism, which warned against the dangers of human vulnerability to the erotic passion.⁵ Elsewhere in the *NA*, Aelian says that fish generally are sexually unrestrained, but, in addition to the *skaros*, he makes special mention of the *sargos*, *kephalos*, *khannê*, and the octopus.⁶ Other animals that Aelian marks as sexually incontinent are mares, camels, tomcats, hawks, mice, rabbits, weasels, red apes from India, and land tortoises.⁷ All of this, of course, casts light also on the moral failings of humans, and one may read Aelian's recurring interest in erotic jealousy, his censure of marital infidelity, and human use of aphrodisiacs and erotic suppressants all as part of the overall moral critique of sexual incontinence in the *NA*.⁸

But Aelian offers also numerous positive portrayals of sexual morality. The *aitnaios* fish, pigeons, and ringdoves are, for example, temperate and faithful mates, while crows, bees, bulls, camels, the *agnos* snake, and turtle-doves all display modesty and are able to control their sexual urges. Hounds sacred to Hephaistos in Sicily even have a natural ability to sense the sexually impure and they chase them from the god's temple.⁹ Most notable, however, is Aelian's elaborate depiction of the sexual life of elephants, which stands as an illustration of Pythagorean ideals; unlike humans, however, elephants have no need of doctrine, since nature itself is their teacher. Male

⁴ See French 1994: 265. ⁵ Gaca 2003: 59–93.

⁶ Fish generally: 4.10; the *kephalos*: 1.11; the *sargos*: 1.22; the *khannê*: 4.5; the octopus: 6.28.

⁷ Mares: 4.12, 11.18; camels: 4.55; tomcats: 6.27; hawks: 10.14; mice: 12.10; rabbits: 13.15; weasels: 15.11; red apes from India: 15.14; and land tortoises: 15.19.

⁸ Jealousy and infidelity: 1.57; 3.42; 7.15; 7.22; 8.19; 11.15; 16.24; 16.27. Aphrodisiacs and erotic suppressants: 1.44, 3.17, 9.13, 11.18, 12.41, 14.18, 15.11. On magic and nature in the *NA*, see Zucker 2000.

⁹ The *aitnaios* fish: 1.12; pigeons: 3.5; ringdoves: 3.44; crows: 3.9; bees: 5.11; bulls: 6.1; camels: 6.60; the *agnos* snake: 9.26; turtledoves: 10.33; hounds of Hephaistos: 11.3.

elephants, for example, approach females not with the intent of rapists or lechers, but “like those requiring the succession of their species and begetting children, in order that they might not be wanting in offspring from one another, but that they might leave their seed” (ὥσπερ οὖν οἱ γένους διαδοχῆς δεόμενοι καὶ παιδοσποροῦντες, ἵνα μὴ αὐτοῖς ἐπιλίπη ἢ ἐπιγονή ἢ ἐξ ἀλλήλων, ἐάσωσι δὲ σπέρμα, *NA* 8.16). They are mindful of sexual desire only once in their whole life, and at that time only for reproduction with their mate. Furthermore, elephants are endowed with such a sense of shame that even when they do copulate for that one time, they modestly conceal themselves in a shady spot thick with boughs. They are, in other words, the natural embodiment of τὸ σῶφρον, “modesty or prudence.”¹⁰ Aelian’s picture of the elephants here corresponds quite closely with the procreationism of the Pythagoreans, which held that sex was only acceptable within marriage and for reproductive purposes, and that even under these conditions sexual pleasure should be moderated. Pythagorean ascetics rejected all other forms of sexual behavior as immoral. This rule, they believed, would ensure the moral improvement of future generations.¹¹

The account of the chaste elephants implies an argument from nature that would seem to validate, to naturalize Pythagorean sexual morality. And while the argument from nature had a long tradition in Greek writing on sexual morality,¹² the *NA* by means of its contradictory representations demonstrates the manipulability of nature for ideological purposes. A reader may be puzzled by a text that at one moment idealizes nature by representing elephants as a model of the human virtue of *sôphrosunê*, but that at another moment disdains creatures like the *skaros* fish as *lagnistatos*, “most lecherous,” because of its uncontrollable sexual urges. Is nature right or wrong, then, when it comes to sexual morality? The problem, however, lies precisely with interpretative strategies that seek only moral certainty and the author’s presumed adherence to certain pre-formed philosophical ideologies. But the *NA*, rejecting any single philosophical doctrine and instead embracing a supple, variegated aesthetic, frustrates such interpretations, as was seen in [Chapter 5](#). It is more productive, I argue, in reading a text that defines itself according to *poikilia*, to seek out, if possible, those very phases of transformation where we might witness the narrative voice shifting, almost imperceptibly, as it seeks an alternative reading of sex in

¹⁰ See also *NA* 10.1.

¹¹ Iamb. *VP* 210 (Aristoxenos); Philostr. *VA* 1.13.3. See Gaca 2003: 94–116.

¹² Goldhill 1995: 52–67.

nature. In other words, the *NA* offers lines of flight that connect and therefore relativize seemingly contradictory moral frameworks.¹³

Aelian's treatment of the hypersexual partridge is a case in point.¹⁴ At first he approaches the topic with the familiar Pythagorean anxiety over pleasurable, non-procreative sex. Close reading, however, reveals that such putatively incontinent sexual behavior, rather than being flatly immoral, may paradoxically offer a means of moral transfiguration. Aelian writes that, "Partridges have no control over sexual desire. Accordingly, they hide the eggs that have been produced, so that the females may not as a result of tending their brood have no time for sex with them" (Πέρδικες δὲ ἀκράτορές εἰσιν ἀφροδίτης· οὐκοῦν τὰ ὥὰ τὰ γεννώμενα ἀφανίζουσιν, ἵνα μὴ ἄγωσιν αἱ θήλειαι παιδοτροφοῦσαι τῆς πρὸς αὐτοὺς ὁμιλίας ἀσχολίαν, *NA* 3.5). The idea is repeated again several chapters later, where Aelian offers the additional notice that when the females are in fact successful in leaving their mate behind to tend to their maternal responsibilities, the male partridges turn to each other for sex: "Whenever the females, having left them behind, then sit upon their eggs, the males intentionally inflame one another to anger, and they both strike and are struck most harshly. And the one who is defeated is mounted like a bird, and he does this without any sense of shame, until which time he himself, having been defeated by a different one even, falls into his similar grips" (ὅταν αὐτοὺς ἀπολιποῦσαι εἴτα ἐπ' ὠμάζωσιν αἱ θήλειαι, οἳ δὲ ἐπίτηδες εἰς ὀργὴν ἀλλήλους ἐξάπτουσι, καὶ παίουσιν τε καὶ παίονται πικρότατα· καὶ ὁ γε ἡττηθεὶς ὀχεύεται ὡς ὄρνις, καὶ δρᾷ τοῦτο ἀνέδην, ἔστ' ἂν ὑφ' ἐτέρου καὶ αὐτὸς ἡττηθεὶς εἴτα ἐς τὰς ὁμοίας λαβὰς ἐμπέσῃ, 3.16). Elsewhere too we learn that cocks and tame partridges, when females are absent, mount male newcomers who have not yet been tamed (4.17). These narratives about partridges, since they characterize sexual behavior between males as non-procreative and as uncomfortably combining pleasure and violence, suggest therefore that sexual behavior between males is the quintessential sign of an inability to moderate or control sexual desire.

There is a shift, however, in the elaborate chapter that opens Book 4, which radically alters the association between immorality and sexual behavior among males. The chapter begins by proclaiming the familiar refrain that partridges are the most licentious (ἀκολαστότατοι) of birds. Here, though, their *akolasia* is marked not by an *erôs* that may be directed indiscriminately at either females or males, but by an *erôs* directed

¹³ On the "line of flight," see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8–9, 14–15.

¹⁴ Lecherous partridges: 3.5, 3.16, 4.1, and 4.17. Cf. Arist. *HA* 613b33–614a10.

at females: “For this reason indeed they desire females too most acutely, and they are very often defeated by lust” (ταῦτά τοι καὶ τῶν θηλειῶν ἐρώσι δριμύτατα, καὶ τῆς λαγνείας ἡττώμενοι συνεχέστατά εἰσιν οἷδε, *NA* 4.1). Aelian notes that those who train these birds for competition place their female mates beside their male partners as spectators, since the male partridge would rather die than allow his female beloved or wife to see him turn away from the blows of his adversary. Then, in a surprise move, Aelian summons as a parallel to the *immoderate* relationships between male and female partridges the *idealized* pederastic relationships among human males: “The men of Crete too have this same idea in mind regarding the objects of their desire” (τοῦτό τοι καὶ Κρητὲς ὑπὲρ τῶν ἐρωμένων ἐνενοούν). One young man, a warrior, was in love with a *meirakion* whose physical beauty equalled his spiritual and intellectual beauty, but who was as yet too young to be summoned to arms. His lover was heroic in battle, but when pressed by the enemy flank he stumbled over a dead body and fell. Then, as an enemy was about to run him through the back with his spear, the young man turned and said, “Do not deliver me a shameful and feeble blow, but strike me face to face, against my chest, so that my beloved might not find me guilty of cowardice,¹⁵ and avoid laying out my dead body – indeed he would not dare to approach one who has so disgraced himself” (μηδαμῶς . . . αἰσχρὰν καὶ ἀναλκιν πληγὴν ἐπαγάγῃς, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τῶν στέρνων ἀντίαν παῖσον, ἵνα μὴ μου δειλίαν ὁ ἐρώμενος καταψηφίσῃται, καὶ φυλάξῃται περιστεῖλαί με νεκρόν, καὶ μάλα γε ἀσχημονοῦντι προσελθεῖν οὐ τολμῶν). Gone suddenly is the conceptualization of male homoeroticism as non-procreative and therefore a sign of moral failure or an inability to control sexual desire. Conceived within the familiar patterns of *paiderastia*, on the contrary, the story of the Cretan lovers serves as a moral paradigm that even an immoderate *erôs* may give rise to other virtues, in this case not just acts martial valor (ἀρετὰς) but also the sense of honor that arises from shame and self-respect (*aidôs*). The digression has not distracted Aelian from his animal inspiration, the bird whose immoderate *erôs* motivated him to a display of honor: “That a human being was ashamed to appear obviously base is no wondrous thing. But for a partridge to have a share of *aidôs*, this is an exceedingly holy gift from nature” (αἰδεσθῆναι μὲν οὖν ἄνθρωπον ὄντα φανῆναι κακὸν οὕτω θαυμαστόν· πέρδικι δὲ μετεῖναι αἰδοῦς ὑπέρσεμνον τοῦτο ἐκ τῆς φύσεως τὸ δῶρον).

¹⁵ Cf. Lys. 14.11 (*Against Alcibiades 1*).

It will be remembered that the chapter started out as a further elaboration on the sexual incontinence of partridges; it ends up, however, as a comparative meditation on how *erôs* – even apparently transgressive *erôs* – may be transformative and give birth to moral virtues, depending on one’s perspective and how one *chooses* to read nature. Being *lagnistatos*, it turns out, does not foreclose the possibility of being a moral creature. At the very least, this chapter on the *aidôs* of partridges offers a compelling challenge to the moral certainties of Pythagorean sexual ideology as it was articulated in the chapter on the reproductive life of elephants. But the preceding examples suggest also more wide-ranging implications. Aelian’s narratives of the hypersexual partridge offer powerful evidence that censorious moral pronouncements in the *NA* should not be taken at face value as indications of the author’s philosophical or moral “attitude.” In fact, the *NA* demonstrates that holding tenaciously to a single philosophical or moral attitude will inevitably fail when the moralist is faced with nature’s infinite variety. In other words, the *NA* embraces sensibilities that are more supple and flexible in their moral interpretations of sex in nature.

Responses to dual sexuality¹⁶ and transgender phenomena

Toward the end of Book 13, Aelian offers a chapter on the various human uses of fish. Placing the hyena fish underneath the pillow of an enemy will, for example, produce bad dreams in the sleeper, and the tail of a *trakhouros* fish, when hung around the neck of a pregnant mare, will soon after cause her to miscarry. But it is the third item in this passage that draws our attention:

μειρακίου γε μὴν δεομένου ἐπὶ μήκιστον τριχῶν ἀπορίας τῶν ἐπὶ τοῦ γενείου, αἷμα ἐπιχρισθὲν θύννου ἁωρόλειον τὸ μείρακιον ἐνεργάζεται. δρᾷ δὲ ἄρα καὶ νάρκη καὶ πνεύμων τὸ αὐτό· ἐν ὅξει γὰρ διασαπείσαι αἱ τούτων σάρκες καὶ ἐπιχρισθεῖσαι τοῖς γενείοις, φυγὴν τριχῶν ἐνεργάζονται φησι. τί πρὸς ταῦτα Ταραντῖνοί τε καὶ Τυρρηνοὶ σοφισταὶ κακῶν δαιδάλων ἐκεῖνό γε ἀνιχνεύσαντές τε καὶ πειράσαντες τὴν πίτταν, ὥς ἐξ ἀνδρῶν εἰς γυναῖκας ἀποκρίνειν; (*NA* 13.27)

And indeed when a teenager needs an absence of hair on his chin for a very long time, the smeared blood of a tuna makes the teenager unnaturally beardless. And indeed both the *narkê* and the *pneumôn* fish do the same thing. For the flesh of these fish, when it has been made to putrefy in

¹⁶ I use the phrase “dual sexuality” throughout this section to refer to a single organism’s simultaneous possession of or potentiality for physical traits typical of both the male and female sexes. In this sense, the term “sexuality” is not meant to imply the modern abstract concept of sexual identity.

vinegar, and when it has been smeared on the chin, makes the hair disappear, it says. Why, considering these things, o Tarentine and Tyrrhenian experts in wicked craftsmanship, did you track down and make trial of your famous pitch, with the result that instead of men you've classed them as women?

The rhetorical question with which this sentence concludes, censuring the effeminacy of the men of Tarentum and the Etruscans, accords with the criticisms of effeminate male behavior elsewhere in Aelian's works. The *Souda* preserves a fragment of Aelian's attack on the philosopher Epicurus and his followers, banished from Rome, Messenia, and Luktos in Crete for their effeminacy and atheism (διὰ τε μαλακίαν καὶ ἀθεότητα).¹⁷ The people of Luktos passed a law condemning their "womanly wisdom" (τὴν θήλειαν σοφίαν), and if any person were daring enough to pursue the lifestyle of Epicurus, he was to be pilloried for twenty days, smeared with honey and milk, to be a feast for bees and flies. If, after twenty days, the perpetrator was still alive, he was to be thrown from a cliff "dressed in women's clothes" (στολήν γυναικείαν περιβληθείς). Such characterizations of Epicurus and his philosophy as effeminate were popular and widespread.

Then there is the evidence of Aelian's scabrous diatribe *The Indictment of the Little Woman* (*Katêgoria tou gunnidos*), an invective against Elagabalus that Aelian "dared" to read in public after the emperor's assassination. Philostratus tells us only that Aelian described the oration as an attack on the tyrant who "shamed Roman affairs with his total licentiousness" (ἄσελγείᾳ πάσῃ τὰ Ῥωμαίων ἥσχυνε, VS 625), but the source of that shamefulness was, as the title of the piece indicates, the emperor's extreme effeminacy.¹⁸ The *Souda* has preserved several of Aelian's fragments on a "womanish thing from Syria" (γύναιον ἐκ Συρίας)¹⁹ which echo several of the more lurid details about Elagabalus described or exaggerated or fabricated by Dio and Herodian and which may well be extracts from the *Katêgoria tou gunnidos* (see [Appendix](#)). But even if they are not from Aelian's political invective, they nevertheless give a vivid sense of the feminine behavior that would have outraged conservative moralists at Rome, especially if it had been the behavior of an emperor.

All this evidence seems to suggest Aelian's consistently negative response to male effeminacy as a sign of an immoral indulgence in pleasure. Being

¹⁷ Fr. 42 Hercher and Domingo-Forasté.

¹⁸ In his painstaking analysis of the historiographical sources for Elagabalus, Arrizabalaga y Prado does not discuss the evidence of Aelian's *Katêgoria tou gunnidos* because it did not meet his criteria for selection ("original proposal of distinct propositions about Varius or his avatar," 2010: 27) – Aelian never names Elagabalus explicitly.

¹⁹ Fr. 123 Hercher, 126 Domingo-Forasté.

confronted by forms of biological life or ways of being that threaten the binary opposition between masculine/feminine and male/female may produce in those who witness, read, or hear about them an acutely negative reaction. I term this the abjective response. There was of course a long tradition against male effeminacy in Greek and Roman thought, but the emphasis on cultivating the proper masculine identity had reached new heights during the second century CE. As Maud Gleason has shown at length, normative masculinity among *pepaideumenoi* and the elite during this period meant conforming to certain modes of deportment, speaking with a voice that conveyed authority and demanded attention, wearing the right clothes, and in general presenting the right kind of public figure. A man aspiring to cultural mastery had to be on his guard against wearing clothes that were deemed too luxurious, against letting the voice slip, against striking a pose that would impugn his masculine persona. Depilation too was suspicious.²⁰ A quick study of the imperial portraiture of the Severans, with their full, manly beards, reveals that this masculine styling persisted into the third century CE (Figs. 7–9). Septimius Severus' portraits show him with the full beard evocative of Marcus Aurelius, Caracalla's shorter beard is consistent with his vigorous military persona, and even the portraits of the younger emperors seek to present on their cheeks the growing hair of the adult male beard.²¹ Aelian's abjective response to the depilatory practices of the Tarentines and Tyrrhenians would seem, therefore, to be consistent with the normative masculinity of his era.

Upon closer inspection, however, Aelian's passage on the depilatory use of fish reveals an interesting inconsistency of thought. First, Aelian not only passes on to posterity the knowledge about the depilatory effectiveness of tuna blood, but he also provides additional notices about how to prepare alternative depilatory ointments using two different fish. This is surely knowledge that someone morally opposed to depilation would try to suppress, not publicize. And the emphatic riposte to the men of Tarentum and the Etruscans seems to mark a personality that is indeed morally opposed to young men artificially removing their facial hair, a cosmetic practice that effects a putatively unnatural transgression of gender. Note especially Aelian's language here, which connotes a reclassification of Italian *meirakia* "from men into women" (ἐξ ἀνδρῶν εἰς γυναικας ἀποκρίνειν).²² And yet that concluding sentence is not itself even straightforward, as it seems at first to object not to male depilation *per se*, but to the Italians' use of pitch (πίτταν) when other, more "natural" ointments were available. Two

²⁰ Gleason 1995.

²¹ Newby 2007: 222–228.

²² Cf. LSJ ἀποκρίνω I.4 (supp.)

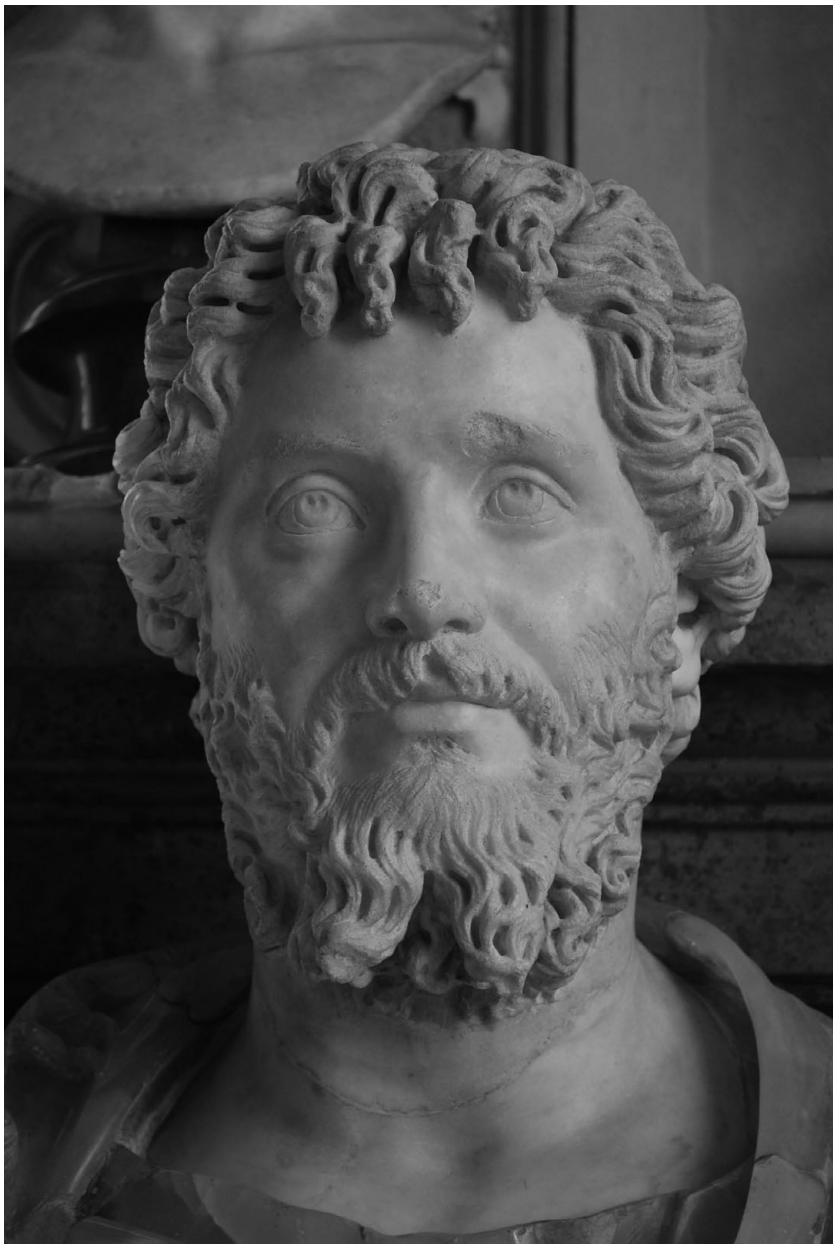


Fig. 7 Bust of Septimius Severus. Musei Capitolini, Rome.



Fig. 8 Bust of Caracalla. Musei Capitolini, Rome.



Fig. 9 Bust of Elagabalus. Musei Capitolini, Rome.

points of view therefore seem to be in competition in this passage: the one establishing that fish are the best means of depilation for young men, the other condemning male effeminacy. This double mentality is born, I argue, when moral certainty is confronted with the physical transformations that nature is capable of effecting, transformations that transcend the myopic limits of human morality.

Aelian's recurring interest in the sex and gender of certain animals is profitably understood with this in mind. It is a commonplace in the *NA* that within any given species there is sexual differentiation between male and female bodies and that male and female partners are each expected to act in certain ways deemed appropriate to their physical sex, both leading up to and during sexual intercourse. There is, in other words, a normative alignment of sex and gender for most species in the *NA*, with males acting in masculine ways and females acting in feminine ways. There are, though, certain species that confound this expectation. The ichneumon, the hare, the hyena, and the swallow all have within each member of the species both male and female potentialities, and they are for that reason all disruptive to normative sex and gender as understood by third-century Roman culture. One might then expect these creatures to meet with the abjective response that attempts to reinforce the "proper" binary categorization of gendered behavior and sexed bodies. Indeed, Aelian's description of the sexual life of ichneumons employs much of the same moralizing language that we have seen before:

Ὁ δὲ ἰχνεύμων ὁ αὐτὸς ἄρα καὶ ἄρρην καὶ θήλυς ἦν, μετεληχῶς καὶ τῆσδε τῆς φύσεως καὶ τῆσδε, καὶ σπεῖρειν τε καὶ τίκτειν τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἢ φύσις δέδωκεν. ἀποκρίνονται δὲ εἰς τὸ ἀτιμότερον γένος οἱ ἡττηθέντες μετὰ τὴν μάχην· οἱ γὰρ κρατήσαντες ἀναβαίνουσι τοὺς ἡττημένους καὶ εἰς αὐτοὺς σπεῖρουσιν. οἱ δὲ ἄθλον τῆς ἡττης φέρονται ὠδινάς τε ὑπομεῖναι καὶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ τέως ἀντὶ πατέρων γενέσθαι μητέρες. τοῖς γε μὴν πολεμιωτάτοις ἀνθρώπων ζώοις, ἄσπιδι καὶ κροκοδείλῳ, ἔχθιστον ὁ ἰχνεύμων, καὶ τὸν γε πόλεμον αὐτῶν ἀνωτέρω εἶπον. λέγονται δὲ οἱ ἰχνεύμονες ἱεροὶ εἶναι Λητοῦς καὶ Εἰλειθυιῶν· σέβουσι δὲ αὐτοὺς Αἰγύπτιοι Ἡρακλεοπολῖται, ὥς φασιν. (*NA* 10.47)

And the same ichneumon is indeed both male and female, having obtained a share both of this nature and of this one, and nature has given to the same ones both to sow and give birth. And the ones that have been defeated after battle are classed as the less honorable sex, for the dominant ones mount the defeated ones and they sow their seed into them. And they bear the prize for their defeat: to endure the pangs of childbirth and for the time being to become mothers instead of fathers. At any rate, to those creatures that are most hostile to man, the asp and the crocodile, the ichneumon is

most hateful, and the war between them I mentioned above [3.22, 8.24]. And ichneumons are said to be sacred to Leto and the Eileithuiai. And the Egyptian Herakleopolitai worship them, so they say.

The battle for sexual supremacy between ichneumons recalls the sexual behavior between male partridges: this is a violent mating ritual of dominance and submission. Also, the phrase “classed as the less honorable sex” (ἀποκρίνονται δὲ εἰς τὸ ἀτιμότερον γένος) recalls Aelian’s criticism of the effeminacy of Italian males (ἐξ ἀνδρῶν εἰς γυναικᾶς ἀποκρίνειν, 13.27). And yet, despite the heavily moralizing language, their sexual behavior does not entirely debase these animals, for Aelian conceives of precisely this aspect of their lives as a *gift* from nature (ἡ φύσις δέδωκεν, 10.47), and their miraculous ability to receive the seed of other males and to become mothers associates them with Leto and the Eileithuiai, the traditional Greek goddesses of childbirth. It is the very ability to become “the less honorable sex,” in other words, that paradoxically also makes them sacred. Being confronted with forms of biological life or ways of being that threaten the binary opposition between masculine/feminine and male/female produces in this case an aporetic reaction that has recourse to the divine, to myth, or to sheer wonder. I term this the solemnizing response.

Like the ichneumon, the hare, too, is a creature of dual sex, and as evidence Aelian offers the anecdote of an anonymous man whom he twice praises for his trustworthiness. This man said that he had once caught a male hare, half-dead, that was swollen as if pregnant. When he dissected the hare, the man discovered a womb bearing three small hares that appeared dead. The warmth of the sun, however, reanimated the baby hares (ὑπὸ τοῦ ἡλίου ἀλεινόμενοι, *NA* 13.12) and they survived. Aelian interjects: “proof, I think, for the wonder of the one who gave them birth” (δεῖγμα ἔμοι δοκεῖν εἰς θαῦμα τοῦ τεκόντος τούτους). Entirely absent from this chapter is the moral outrage against male creatures “debased” by partaking in behavior deemed more appropriate for members of the female sex. On the contrary, the hare is ennobled by having a share of each sex: so powerful is the nurturing quality of the hare’s womb that it is associated with the life-giving power of the sun – already established as a prominent deity during the Severan period – and this inspires wonder instead of moral scorn. Again, when faced with the evidence of nature, Aelian finds the solemnizing response more appropriate than the abjective.

It is clear from the passages on the ichneumon and the hare that it is through association with divinity that the “monstrosity” of dual sexuality or transgender phenomena is transformed into something positively

wondrous. It is only to be expected, then, that in two relevant passages on the swallow and the hyena Aelian refers to Teiresias, the blind prophet who lived as both a man and a woman. The case of the swallow is not, strictly speaking, one of dual sexuality, as was seen with the ichneumon and the hare. Rather, the swallow offers a case where, like the men of Tarentum and Etruria, one sex of the species behaves as if it were a member of the opposite sex, this of course presuming the binary opposition of sex and gender in Greek and Roman thought:

Οἱ μὲν ὄρνιθες οἱ ἔτεροι ἀναβαίνονται, ὡς λόγος, αἱ δὲ χελιδόνες οὐ, ἀλλὰ τούτων γε ἐναντία ἢ μίξις ἐστί. καὶ τὸ αἴτιον οἶδεν ἡ φύσις. λέγει δὲ ὁ πλείων λόγος ὅτι πεφρίκασι τὸν Τηρέα καὶ δεδοίκασι μὴ ποτε ἄρα προσεργίπυσας λάθρα εἶτα ἐργάσθαι τραγωδίαν καὶ νῦν. ἦν δὲ ἄρα καὶ τοῦτο χελιδόνι δῶρον ἐκ τῆς φύσεως, ὥς γε ἐμὲ κρίνειν, τὸ τιμωτάτον· πηρωθεῖσα τὴν ὄψιν περόναις ἔαν τύχη, ὁρᾷ αὐθις. τί οὖν ἔτι τὸν Τειρεσίαν ἄδομεν, καίτοι μὴ ἐνταυθοῖ, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν Ἄιδου σοφώτατον ψυχῶν, ὡς Ὅμηρος λέγει; (NA 2.3)

Different birds are mounted, so the story goes, but not the swallows: for these birds, intercourse is face-to-face. And nature knows the reason. But the more widespread story is that they tremble at Tereus and fear lest, ever creeping up in secret, he then perform a tragedy even now. But this too is for the swallow, as I at least reckon it, the most valuable gift from nature: if its eyes ever happen to be maimed with pins, it sees again. Why, then, do we still celebrate Teiresias, even though he is not here, but is, as Homer says, the wisest soul in the house of Hades?

The narrative once again motivates the solemnizing response. The active sexual behavior of female swallows that refuse to be mounted remains for Aelian a mysterious phenomenon; only nature knows why it happens. What Aelian offers instead is mythological interpretation. It must be recognized that Aelian has here an opportunity for moral censure. Instead, though, Aelian turns toward emotional complexity, evoking the tragedy (τραγωδίαν) of the myth of Prokne, Philomela, and Tereus, a story popular in the literature of the Empire and characterized by rape, deceit, and murder. With this violent myth in mind, Aelian understands that the unconventional sexual behavior of the female swallows arises from fear (πεφρίκασι, δεδοίκασι) that the same tragedy will repeat itself. The additional notice that the swallow is able to regain its sight after it has been blinded finally establishes the bird's connection with the blind prophet Teiresias, whose reputation frankly suffers by comparison with that of the bird: the swallow, according to Aelian, should inspire more wonder than the figure from myth. Granted, the connection with Teiresias arises from

the motif of blindness, but the swallow's transgendered behavior reinforces the connection.

In his structuralist study of androgyny and hermaphroditism in Greek and Roman thought, Luc Brisson has shown that Teiresias' dual sexuality is essentially related to his gift of prophecy: "Because Tiresias, through divination, establishes relations between human beings and gods, Tiresias must also, in his very person, successively, as he-she passes from one sex to the other, transcend the most important opposition of all for the human race, which is divided between the masculine and the feminine."²³ Brisson also offers a "brief bestiary" of animals associated with Teiresias, frequently drawing on relevant passages from the *NA*.²⁴ The ambiguity that characterizes Teiresias "spreads to the animal world," and it is cosmically pervasive because, as Brisson sees it, "essential oppositions are maintained only at the point where they are bypassed." In Brisson's reading, then, figures like Teiresias, the ichneumon, the hare, and the swallow produce the solemnizing response – that is, they elicit wonder rather than disgust – because they act as mediators, ultimately reifying the binary system which they only apparently disrupt.

Brisson's theorization is, however, helpful only to a limited extent, as it attempts to understand the solemnizing response by means of a return to an ordered system that reinstates binary oppositions. A different interpretative strategy is called for, I argue, when dealing with a text like the *NA*, which mediates the Greek literary tradition to produce not an ordered system, but something quite different: a multiplicity of fragmented experiences and even a rejection of the rational. This last statement might seem excessive, and cautious readers will wonder how I could claim that a writer so influenced by Stoic philosophy would *reject* the rational. In [Chapter 5](#), however, I showed that, while one may find numerous elements of Stoic thought in the *NA*, in no way should Aelian be considered dogmatically Stoic, especially in his treatments of *logos* and his adoption of paradoxography as his favored literary genre. This philosophical background is relevant for considering Aelian's brief chapter on the dual sexuality of the hyena:

Τὴν ὕαιναν τῆτες μὲν ἄρρενα εἰ θεάσαιο, τὴν αὐτὴν εἰς νέωτα ὄψει θῆλυν· εἰ δὲ θῆλυν νῦν, μετὰ ταῦτα ἄρρενα· κοινωνοῦσί τε ἀφροδίτης ἑκατέρας, καὶ γαμοῦσί τε καὶ γαμοῦνται, ἀνὰ ἔτος πᾶν ἀμείβουσαι τὸ γένος. οὐκοῦν τὸν Καϊνέα καὶ τὸν Τειρεσίαν ἀρχαίους ἀπέδειξε τὸ ζῶον τοῦτο οὐ κόμποις ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῖς. (*NA* 1.24)

²³ Brisson 2002: 145.

²⁴ These are *NA* 11.19 and 12.5 (the mouse); 1.25 (the hyena); and 10.47 (the ichneumon). Brisson does not discuss *NA* 2.3 (the swallow).

If you should see a hyena this year that is male, the same one next year you will see as a female. And if female now, after this, male. And they have a share of each kind of sexual desire, and in mating they are both active and passive, each year changing sex. Accordingly, this creature proves Kaineus and Teiresias to be old-fashioned not by means of boasts but by means of its very actions.

The story of the hyena's dual sexuality was well known in antiquity.²⁵ Aristotle, however, in both the *De generatione animalium* and the *Historia animalium*, sought to put the story to rest with the reasoned explanation that what seemed like the hyena's possession of both male and female genitalia was really just an optical illusion:

ὥπται γὰρ ἡ ὕαινα ἐν ἔχουσα αἰδοῖον· ἐν ἐνίοις γὰρ τόποις οὐ σπάνις τῆς θεωρίας· ἀλλ' ἔχουσιν αἱ ὕαιναι ὑπὸ τὴν κέρκον ὁμοίαν γραμμὴν τῷ τοῦ θήλεος αἰδοίῳ. ἔχουσι μὲν οὖν καὶ οἱ ἄρρενες καὶ αἱ θήλειαι τὸ τοιοῦτον σημεῖον, ἀλλ' ἀλίσκονται οἱ ἄρρενες μᾶλλον· διὸ τοῖς ἐκ παρόδου θεωροῦσι ταύτην ἐποίησε τὴν δόξαν. (Arist. *GA* 3.6, 757a7–12)

For the hyena has been seen possessing one type of genital. For in some places there is no lack of observation. But hyenas have under their tail a line that resembles the genitals of the female. Both males and females, then, have such a mark, but males are caught more often, which is why it gave this opinion to those who apply only a cursory inspection.

περὶ δὲ τῶν αἰδοίων ὃ λέγεται, ὥς ἔχει ἄρρενος καὶ θηλείας, ψευδὸς ἐστίν. ἀλλ' ἔχει τὸ μὲν τοῦ ἄρρενος ὅμοιον τῷ τῶν λύκων καὶ τῶν κυνῶν, τὸ δὲ δοκοῦν θηλείας εἶναι ὑποκάτω μὲν ἔχει τῆς κέρκου, παραπλήσιον δ' ἐστὶ τῷ σχήματι τῷ τοῦ θήλεος, οὐκ ἔχει μέντοι οὐδένα πόρον· ὑποκάτω δ' αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν ὁ τῆς περιττώσεως πόρος. ἡ δὲ θήλεια ὕαινα ἔχει μὲν καὶ τὸ ὅμοιον τῷ τῆς θηλείας λεγομένῳ αἰδοίῳ, ἔχει δ' ὥσπερ ὁ ἄρρην αὐτὸ ὑποκάτω τῆς κέρκου, πόρον δ' οὐδένα ἔχει· μετὰ δὲ τοῦτο ὁ τῆς περιττώσεως ἐστὶ πόρος, ὑποκάτω δὲ τούτου τὸ ἀληθινὸν αἰδοῖον. (Arist. *HA* 579b16–25)

But what is said about its genitals, that it has those of both a male and female, is not true. Rather, the part of the male is like that of wolves and dogs; the part that seems to be of the female is underneath the tail, and it is very similar in shape to that of the female; it does not, however, have any passage. And beneath that is the passage for excretion. And the female hyena has also that which is similar to what is said to be the female genital, and she, just like the male, has this beneath the tail, and it has no passage. And after this is the passage for excrement. And beneath this, the true genital.

²⁵ Ov. *Met.* 15.408–409; Plin. *Nat.* 8.105, 28.92; Rufinus, *Recognitiones Pseudoclementinae* 8.25; Opp. *C.* 3.288–292. For a discussion of the hare, hyena, and sexual deviance in the writings of early Christian moralists, see Boswell 1980: 137–156.

Diodoros of Sicily, following Aristotle, also rejected the story of the hyena's dual sexuality.²⁶ Alternative accounts were therefore in circulation by the time Aelian was writing in the early third century CE, the one perpetuating the story of the hyena's dual sexuality, the other debunking it as erroneous. Nowhere in the *NA*, however, does Aelian introduce the refutation articulated by Aristotle and Diodoros. Though it is uncertain whether Aelian would have read the passage as it appears in Diodoros or the original passages by Aristotle, it has been established that Aelian worked from the epitome of Aristotle's *Historia animalium* by Aristophanes of Byzantium,²⁷ who duly preserved for Aelian the truth about the hyena's differentiated sex: "And both the female and the male have their genitals also beneath their tail and a rather odd sunken region; they say it does not have a passage" (ἔχει δὲ καὶ ὑπὸ τὴν κέρκον τὰ αἰδοῖα καὶ ὁ ἄρρην καὶ ἡ θήλεια καὶ περισσώτερόν τινα τόπον ἔγκοilon, πόρον μὴ ἔχοντά φασι, *Epit.* 2.310) – lacking a "passage," the hyena's additional "sunken region" has no functional role in reproduction, but presents only the appearance of additional genitalia. Faced with a choice, however, Aelian decides that the world is more interesting when a hyena has both male and female genitalia and he therefore ignores his Aristotelian source, rejecting the rational explanation. Aelian's probable suppression of the more reasonable explanation accords, of course, with the paradoxographical tendencies of the *NA*, a text that regularly strives to elicit a response of wonder from its readers and thereby to flout Stoic dogma, which demanded its practitioners to approach *ta phusika* with reason, not with wonder. But this is not a "mere" literary explanation for Aelian's perpetuation of the story of the hyena's dual sexuality. Genre itself communicates an ideological position – this despite Aelian's overt rejection of a totalizing ideological narrative. Accordingly, we must understand this chapter on the hyena not just as a compiler's passive handing-down of traditional lore, but as Aelian's willful (re)writing into existence of an animal's intersex body at the expense of rational argument.

So persistent and energetic is Aelian's turn toward the marvelous in the *NA*, that I resist the notion (*pace* Brisson) that the paradoxographical quality of the text serves only to reinforce normative thinking about sex and gender in third-century Rome. Instead, I argue, the *NA* – its focus so trained on the incoherent and the disruptive – offers a textual site that explores the discursive construction of the natural world, and thereby undermines the essentialism of the binary oppositions male/female and

²⁶ D.S. 32.12.2–3 (Phot. *Bibl.* codex 244, 379a18–30). See Brisson 2002: 137–140.

²⁷ De Stefani 1904b: 421–445.

masculine/feminine.²⁸ For Aelian, nature and culture are fluid. This book has largely focused on Aelian's countercultural literary persona and how the *NA* invites polyphony and multiplicities, even while it is itself a product of Rome's political dominance and the cultural dominance of Hellenism. My approach has been encouraged by the summary statements of Aelian himself, when in his epilogue he anticipates the criticisms of peers who not only will take issue with his work's luxuriant *poikilia*, but who also "will find fault if I set aside my free time for these things, when it is possible to raise my brow in arrogance and to appear in palaces and to come into great wealth" (δι' αἰτίας ἔξουσιν, εἰ τὴν ἑμαυτοῦ σχολὴν κατεθέμην ἐς ταῦτα, ἔξδὸν καὶ ὠφρυῶσθαι καὶ ἐν ταῖς αὐλαῖς ἐξετάζεσθαι καὶ ἐπὶ μέγα προήκειν πλούτου, *NA* ep., p. 430, lines 10–12). Aelian encourages readers to receive his text as a disavowal of normative expectations, even, I argue, in its representations of gender and sexed bodies. In telling these stories of the ichneumon, hare, hyena, and swallow, Aelian may even have been reminded of the philosopher-sophist Favorinus of Arelate. Though he never knew him personally (Favorinus died shortly before Aelian was born), Favorinus was famous and controversial: he had a successful, international career as an orator, despite that he was both male and female (*androthêlus*), born with dual sexuality (*diphuês*), and his effeminate delivery and shrill voice were the objects of both fascination and criticism.²⁹ Aelian, himself conscious of his own limited abilities in declamation,³⁰ probably also felt an affinity with Favorinus as a practitioner of literary *poikilia*: Favorinus' *Varied history* (Παντοδαπὴ ἱστορία) was certainly an influence on Aelian's own work.

Some will perhaps object that my interpretation is anachronistic, an instance of poststructuralist presentism, imposing a queer sexual politics upon a work that, when seen in context, is actually very much of its time and a literary valorization of mainstream Hellenism. Aelian's text certainly was popular in its day and had a long *Nachleben* into the late Byzantine period, phenomena suggestive, perhaps, that the *NA* was not the disruptive text I assert it to be. To such an objection, however, I counter that the ideologically disruptive qualities of the text persist *in spite of* the text's mainstream popularity and continue – insidiously – to pose interpretative problems for conservative readers who would continue to demand the certainties of normative sex and gender. One powerful testimony to the

²⁸ Cf. Sedgwick 2008: 9–11.

²⁹ Philostr. VS 489–492. See Barigazzi 1966, 1993; Gleason 1995; Holford-Strevens 1997; and Keulen 2009: 97–III.

³⁰ Philostr. VS 624.

text's longevity is also, paradoxically, evidence of its continued threat to intelligibility: a fifteenth-century manuscript attests to the late Byzantine practice of thematically reordering the chapters of the *NA* so that all of Aelian's descriptions of a single animal would be tidily grouped together under a single heading.³¹ This late Byzantine attempt to impose order upon an unruly text also, it will be noted, eradicates from the work the aesthetic *poikilia* that could be associated with effeminacy and that therefore impugned the text's masculine authority (see [Chapter 3](#)). A critical probing of normative sex and gender were – even if latently so – an inherent part of the *NA* from its very inception.

Paradoxography works according to a principle of disruption, by seeking out and embracing those things that threaten intelligibility.³² This disruptive quality is compounded when the paradoxographical mode is incorporated within a collection that rejects orderly structure. Other genres, especially invective (think of the *Indictment of the Little Woman*), reinforce that intelligibility, putting things in their “proper” place. It is to be expected therefore that the *NA*, an extravagant expression of *poikilia* synthesizing multiple literary genres, would be penetrated by the normative discourse on sex and gender and thereby perpetuate the abjective response to that which bears the potential for disruption. But when the abjective response is interpolated *within* a text that defines itself according to disruption, the abjective response manifestly fails as an instrument of power, insofar as it is clearly impotent to silence or to impose order upon the maelstrom of surrounding disruptive narratives. In paradoxography, the solemnizing response celebrating the disruptive becomes itself the normative mode. However loud Aelian's voice may be at its most stridently abjective – whether condemning Epicureans, the emperor Elagabalus, or the effeminate men of Tarentum and Etruria – the *NA* exists, with its luxurious *poikilia*, to overwhelm, consume, and thereby render that voice nearly unintelligible.

Interspecies eroticism and monstrosities of reciprocal desire

The third category of erotic discourse that I have identified in the *NA*, and the theme with which the remainder of this chapter is concerned, is

³¹ This is *Laurentianus* 86,8 (F). See De Stefani 1902; Scholfield 1958: xxv; González Suárez 2007; and GLR xv.

³² See Hansen 1998: 252, on Phlegon of Tralles. I here adopt some of the vocabulary offered by Judith Butler for my queer reading of paradoxography (Salih and Butler 2004: 263).

the expression of sexual desire between animals of different species.³³ Of the III entries in the *NA* that deal with sex or *erôs*, 29 (or 26%) deal with interspecies eroticism, and 22 of those discuss sexual or erotic relationships between animals and humans.³⁴ This is surprising and commands attention, for these relationships offer a direct point of contact between the two stated subjects of Aelian's text: the world of animals and the world of humans.³⁵ As these episodes demonstrate, the separation between worlds is not so clearly demarcated as perhaps we would like to believe when it comes to sexual desire; revealing the natural laws of sex as mere convention, *erôs* transcends and dissolves the boundary between animal and human.

These human/animal erotic relationships receive a variety of treatments in the *NA*. Some are offered in catalogue form within a single entry,³⁶ but others receive some of the most elaborate narrative treatments in the whole of the collection. These are the stories of two dolphin/boy pairs (2.6, 6.15), the white elephant and his Indian trainer (3.46), the Judean woman loved by a snake (6.17), the Sybarite goatherd and his pretty she-goat (6.42), and the Athenian boy Sokles and his salacious horse (6.44).³⁷ In these stories, the *erôs* between human and animal may be problematic or idealized, physical or spiritual, asymmetrical or symmetrical.

When *erôs* defines the relationship between human and animal, the results are ambiguous: some of the human partners become bestial by their erotic association with animals, while some animals are elevated by their participation in *erôs* with a human partner. Aelian thus seems to reinforce the Stoic categorization whereby humans are elevated above irrational beasts.³⁸ This distinction is suspicious in a text that otherwise idealizes animals in their natural state. I suggest, however, that for Aelian, the difference between animal and human in the realm of the erotic resides in the style in which one responds to *erôs*. Sensual indulgence is morally corrupt; conversely, when it is properly stylized as spiritual and unphysical, *erôs* represents a philosophical ideal. So far, Aelian appears to uphold the classical Platonic paradigm of a chaste, heavenly *erôs*. But Aelian is a slippery writer, and his idealization of a physically chaste, Platonic *erôs* is a sophistic

³³ On the assimilation of zoophilia in Greek art to modes of representing human erotic relationships, see Alexandridis 2008: 285–311. On the human–animal romances in Aelian, see French 1994: 271.

³⁴ Erotic relationships between animals and humans: 1.6, 37–38; 2.6; 3.46; 4.9, 56, 58; 5.29; 6.15, 17, 29, 42, 44, 63; 7.19, 39; 8.4, 10; 12.34, 36; 15.14. Other narratives of interspecies eroticism: 1.22, 50; 2.10; 8.1; 9.66; 12.16; 16.9.

³⁵ This aspect of Aelian's collection interests Hübner as well, though he restricts his discussion to narratives of animal *philanthrôpia*; see Hübner 1984: 164–167.

³⁶ See *NA* 1.6, 5.29, 7.19, 8.10, and 12.34. On depictions of Glaucus and the goose in Hellenistic art, see Thompson 1964.

³⁷ On *NA* 6.17 and 42, see Korhonen 2012: 72–74. ³⁸ Cf. D.L. 7.129.

artifice. One reader may take that facade at face value, but Aelian's allusive prose offers other readers opportunities to look beneath his moralizing superstructure. In the insistence that there is no sexual impropriety in such an idealized romance as that between, say, a boy and his dolphin, Aelian hints at alternative possibilities and the "monstrous" truths of sex that lurk beneath the surface.³⁹ Facilitated by the text's artfully random structure and by its luxuriant *poikilia*, this ludic quality becomes a defining characteristic of the erotic stories in the *NA*.

The suspicions of sexual behavior that arouse moral criticism in the *NA* are paradigmatically illustrated by the Athenian story of Sokles and his horse, while two boy/dolphin romances are conceived according to an ideal *erôs* and *anterôs*. Finally, the competing erotic narratives about the boy Nerites – though technically not examples of interspecies eroticism – function as Aelian's mythological manifesto on the essentially ambiguous nature of *erôs* and as an indication of the hermeneutic sophistication that readers must bring to Aelian's text.

Sokles and his horse

The story of the Athenian boy Sokles and his horse in Book 6 is an interesting case, as it represents a relationship that has the potential of becoming an idealized romance, but which is aborted when public suspicion is aroused about the physical nature of the relationship. Aelian begins the narrative as an excursus on the goodwill (*eunoia*) and friendship (*philia*) that horses are capable of exhibiting towards owners who act as benefactors and who exhibit care for their creatures. But the salacious story of Sokles that follows instead charts *erôs* gone wrong. The narrative first establishes the symmetry of physical beauty typical of romance, as we are told that the beautiful boy bought a horse that was itself beautiful.⁴⁰ But, Aelian says, this horse, which was intensely erotic and more clever than other horses, conceives an acute *erôs* for his master. When the boy would approach, the horse used to snort and leap (ἐφριμάττετο, 6.44, p. 150, line 22); when the boy would clap his hands, the horse would whinny and prance (ἐφρυάττετο); when the boy would mount, the horse readily offered himself (ἀναβαίνοντος ἑαυτὸν παρέϊχεν εὐπειθῆ, line 23); when the boy stood in front of him, the horse would look at him with melting eyes (ὕγρον ἑώρα, line 24).

³⁹ Korhonen 2012: 68–69 emphasizes the elasticity of the terms *erôs* and *philia* in Aelian's erotic narratives; my own position is that Aelian's calculatedly ambiguous erotic language pushes the reader to confront varying degrees of human–animal emotional and even physical entanglement.

⁴⁰ Konstan 1994: 47–48.

Though it seems harmless and merely charming, the horse's behavior suggests a dangerous physicality and a morally dubious disposition. First, the verb φριμάττεσθαι ("to snort and leap") connotes the response of sexually aroused animals. In Herodotus, the verb is used of a horse after smelling the scent of a mare's genitalia on the hand of Dareios' groom (τὸν δὲ αἰσθόμενον φριμάξασθαι τε καὶ χρεμετίσαι, Hdt. 3.87). This is also the verb used by Theocritus to describe the randy goats of the goatherd Komatas in the hypersexual fifth *Idyll* (φριμάσσεο, πᾶσα τραγίσκων | νῦν ἄγέλα, Theoc. 5.141–142). Second, the verb φρυάττεσθαι ("to whinny and prance") is frequently used as a metaphor for insolent behavior in erotic contexts.⁴¹

Third, apart from the obvious sexual innuendo in the boy's "mounting" of the horse (ἀναβαίνοντος),⁴² the description of the erotic horse as εὐπειθής evokes the obedient horse of the tripartite soul in Plato's *Phaedrus*. In this *locus classicus* of erotic literature, the obedient horse, a metaphor for the spiritual self-control of the *erastês*, is compelled by a sense of shame to prevent itself from leaping at the *erômenos* (ὁ μὲν εὐπειθής τῷ ἡνιόχῳ τῶν ἵππων, αἰεὶ τε καὶ τότε αἰδοῖ βιαζόμενος, ἑαυτὸν κατέχει μὴ ἐπιπηδᾶν τῷ ἔρωμένῳ, Pl. *Phdr.* 254a). He is contrasted, of course, with his yoke-mate, who "has no further regard for the goads of the charioteer or for the whip, but leaping rushes violently, and causing trouble for both his yoke-mate and the charioteer compels them to advance towards the beloved and to recall the delight of sexual pleasure" (254a). The charioteer of the soul is only able to rein in his team of horses when he remembers true beauty and *sôphrosunê*, and if the charioteer fails to remember true beauty and *sôphrosunê*, then the *erastês* is at risk of committing some sexual outrage upon the body of his *erômenos*.⁴³ The Platonic intertext invites suspicions about this particular horse's obliging disposition whenever Sokles wants to mount him: it remains unclear whether his obedience is motivated by *sôphrosunê* or by sexual pleasure.

The horse's behavior, though it was already erotic, nevertheless seemed delightful (καὶ ταῦτα μὲν ἐρωτικά ὄντα ἤδη ὁμῶς τερπνὰ ἐδόκει, *NA* 6.44, p. 150, lines 24–25). This is the narrative hint whereby we might speculate about the erotic interests of Sokles himself for his frisky horse:

⁴¹ Alciph. 3.27; *Anthologia Palatina* 12.33 (Meleager); "Ἐρωτες . . . σκύλα φρουασσόμενοι, *Anthologia Planudea* 215 (Philippos).

⁴² On ἀναβαίνειν as a euphemism for sexual congress, see Ar. fr. 329, ἀναβῆναι τὴν γυναῖκα βούλομαι, and Pherekrates 131.4; "This usage is usually limited to animal copulation" (Henderson 1991: 155).

⁴³ Gaca 2003: 32–33 reads this passage as part of Plato's programmatic attempt to regulate human sexual desire. Belfiore 2006: 204 emphasizes Socrates' ambiguous, satyr-like representation of the horse. See also Davidson 2007: 205–206.

how far is the boy willing to go to gratify his equine *erastês*? Had the pair conducted themselves with more modesty in public, we might never have known about the covert sexual realities of their relationship. Their sexuality, however, cannot be concealed, for “the horse began to be more reckless, because he was even desiring to do something to the young man, and a rather monstrous story about the pair began to spread” (ἦν ὥς τι καὶ δρασίμων εἰς τὸ μεῖράκιον προπετέστερος, καὶ διέρρει λόγος ὑπὲρ ἀμφοῖν ἄτοπώτερος, lines 25–26). Sokles, finding the slander unbearable, sells the horse, “on the grounds that he hated a lover who cannot control himself” (ὥς ἔραστὴν ἀκόλαστον μισήσας, lines 27–28). But there is ambiguity in this last participial phrase, for in addition to conveying the ground of belief on which Sokles is acting, the particle ὥς may also convey a pretext for selling the horse. But such a pretext, generated only by the gossip of the Athenians and allowing Sokles to maintain his dignity, paradoxically ends up confirming the suspicions about the sexual nature of the boy’s relationship with his horse: had it not been for the rumours, Sokles would have kept quiet and continued to enjoy potentially illicit pleasures with his equine companion. On this interpretation, we might infer that Sokles was not really opposed at all either to the erotic attentions of his horse or to the sexual activity that the horse was plotting. Sokles may even have felt a reciprocal *erôs* for the horse. The public shame aroused by the overt sexuality of the relationship, however, compels Sokles to perform for the critical Athenian public the socially sanctioned role of *sôphrôn erômenos*, the boy who does not himself succumb to the pleasures of a passive *erôs*, but who behaves with moderation, preserving his chastity. Selling the horse and declaring that he hates a lover who cannot control himself, Sokles clears his reputation of any suspicion of sexual impropriety. One is reminded of Plutarch’s anecdote about Periandros, the tyrant of Ambrakia, who, when he publicly asked his *erômenos*, “Aren’t you pregnant yet?” was in turn killed by the humiliated young man (*Amatorius* 768f). Until that public utterance, though, the young man had apparently been complicit in his sexual relationship with Periandros and had perhaps even taken pleasure in the sexually receptive role. In the case of both Aelian’s narrative and the Plutarchan anecdote, sex is only licit when it remains unseen and unspoken.⁴⁴ But instead of leaving us with the image of a hypocritically triumphant Sokles, Aelian concludes his narrative with the tragic image of the lovesick horse: “incapable of enduring the separation from the beautiful

⁴⁴ On Aelian’s narratives of human–animal affection as “sublimated pederastic relationships,” see Korhonen 2012: 71–72.

boy, he set himself free from living by means of a most violent starvation” (οὐ φέρων τὴν ἐρημίαν τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ καλοῦ, ἑαυτὸν τοῦ ζῆν ἀπήλλαξε λιμῶ βίαιοτάτῳ, *NA* 6.44, p. 150, lines 28–29). Conservative Athenian sexual morality is preserved, but Aelian is mindful of the costs.

Boys and their dolphins

The failed romance between Sokles and his horse is to be contrasted with the idealized romances between two boys and their dolphins.⁴⁵ Such stories were a commonplace in the tradition of animal lore: in addition to the famous story of Arion and the dolphin who rescued him from pirates,⁴⁶ Aelian notes parallel stories from Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemaios II and also from Puteoli in Italy (6.15). But the stories of the boys from the Aegean island of Poroselene (2.6) and from the Karian town of Iasos (6.15) stand out in Aelian’s collection for their elaborate narrative form.

In the case of the boy from Poroselene, Aelian provides the eyewitness account of Leonidas of Byzantium. An old island couple once nurtured a local dolphin in their harbor, offering it the most enticing bait, and Aelian even refers to the dolphin as their “foster child” (τρόφιμον, *NA* 2.6, p. 30, line 2). This couple also had a child of their own who was raised alongside the tame dolphin, and, says Aelian, “somehow from being brought up together both human and animal, unawares, came to have an *erôs* for one another, and – this indeed is what is celebrated – an exceedingly holy *anterôs* was held in honour among the aforementioned” (καὶ πῶς ἐκ τῆς συντροφίας ἐλαθέτην ἐς ἔρωτα ἀλλήλων ὑπελθόντε ὃ τε ἄνθρωπος καὶ τὸ ζῷον, καί, τοῦτο δὴ τὸ ἁδόμενον, ὑπέρσεμνος ἀντέρως ἐτιμᾶτο ἐν τοῖς προειρημένοις, lines 5–8). When mature (τέλειος ὢν, line 11), the dolphin began to repay his foster parents for nurturing him, not only by bringing back to them fish from the sea, but also by performing a number of aquatic exercises with the boy, now no longer a mere *pais* (a “boy” generally) but a more mature *meirakion* (around the age of 18). When the boy would call to him, the dolphin would cease whatever he was doing to swim to the boy’s side, darting through the water “like a ship under way with a great surge of waves” (δίκην ἐλαυνομένης νεὼς πολλῶ τῷ ῥοθίῳ, line 22). Aelian continues:

⁴⁵ On the tradition of romantic intimacy between dolphins and boys, see also Arist. *HA* 631a8–11, Plin. *Nat.* 9.24, Plin. *Ep.* 9.33, and Gel. 6.8.

⁴⁶ Hdt. 1.23–24. Aelian treats Arion at *NA* 12.45. See also Bowra 1963.

καὶ πλησίον τῶν παιδικῶν γενόμενος συμπαίστης τε ἦν καὶ συνεσκίρτα, καὶ πῇ μὲν τῷ παιδί παρενήχετο, πῇ δὲ ὁ δελφίς οἷα προκαλούμενος εἶτα μέντοι εἰς τὴν ἄμιλλαν τὴν εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ παιδικὰ ὑπῆγε. καὶ τὸ ἔτι θαῦμα, ἀπέστη καὶ τῆς πρώτης ποτὲ καὶ δὴ καὶ ὑπενήξατο αὐτῷ, οἷα νικώμενος ἡδέως δήπου. (*NA* 2.6, p. 30, line 22–p. 31, line 1)

And coming to the side of his beloved, he was his playmate and leapt together with him, and sometimes he would swim alongside the boy, and sometimes the dolphin, as though challenging, would indeed then draw his beloved into a contest with him. And this was a further wonder: the dolphin gave up the first place sometimes and indeed even swam second to him, as though pleased to be defeated, I suppose.

These performances in the harbor of Poroselene became famous, and to those who sailed there, the spectacle (ὄραμα, p. 31, line 2) was thought to be among the city's highlights.

The parallel story in Book 6 of a dolphin and a boy from Iasos, however, though also representing an idealized *erôs*, takes an unexpectedly tragic turn. In fact, despite the idealized *erôs* that the story represents, the tragedy may be said to arise from the introduction of a more physical element into the relationship between boy and dolphin. In this sense the story from Iasos should be understood as a hybrid narrative, blending the apparently chaste, idealized *erôs* of boy and dolphin with the sexual imagery that characterized the relationship between Sokles and his frisky horse. The physicality of this *erôs* is signaled first by the context out of which this relationship arose: “the gymnasium of the people of Iasos is situated right upon the sea, and the ephebes in fact, after their running and wrestling, go down there and wash themselves, in accordance with an ancient custom” (τὸ γυμνάσιον τὸ τῶν Ἰασέων ἐπίκειται τῇ θαλάσσει, καὶ οἱ γε ἔφηβοι μετὰ τοὺς δρόμους καὶ τὰς κονίστρας κατιόντες ἐνταῦθα ἀπολούονται κατὰ τι ἔθος ἀρχαῖον, *NA* 6.15, p. 136, lines 21–23). The image of the naked, toned bodies of the ephebes offers a context for the emergence of *erôs* whose quality is different from that of the preceding story. In Poroselene, the *erôs* between boy and dolphin grew out of a family context: the pair was raised together and their erotic relationship developed slowly over time. In Iasos, however, the *erôs* of the dolphin is brought on instantaneously by the vision of the naked young men fresh from exercise: “with a most acute *erôs*, a dolphin falls in love with one remarkable for his beauty” (ἐνῤα τοῦ τὴν ὥραν ἐκπρεποῦς ἐρᾷ δελφίς ἔρωτα δριμύτατον, lines 23–24).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Plutarch, referring to the same story, denies the possibility of real eroticism between dolphin and boy (*De sollertia animalium* 36.984e). For the erotic attraction of boys fresh from the gymnasium, cf. Theoc. 2.77–80, Chariton 1.1.5, and *Anthologia Palatina* 12.192 (Strato).

Imagistic and linguistic echoes of the story of Sokles and the Athenian horse reinforce the physicality of this scene. In describing the *erôs* of this dolphin, for example, Aelian uses almost exactly the same language with which he described the *erôs* of the horse for the boy Sokles (ἐρᾷ τοῦ δεσπότητος δριμύτατα, *NA* 6.44, p. 150, line 21). But whereas Aelian emphasized the monstrous quality of the horse's *erôs*, here he indicates that this same acute *erôs* had a very different outcome, for the dolphin "by means of their constant intercourse induced an intimacy and a powerful goodwill from the boy toward himself" (τῇ συνηθείᾳ φιλίαν τινὰ καὶ εὐνοίαν εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἐκ τοῦ παιδὸς ἰσχυρὰν ἐπηγάγετο, 6.15, p. 136, line 26–p. 137, line 1). These, the reader will remember, are the same ideal qualities shown by horses lucky enough to have owners who care for them (cf. ἀμείβεται τὸν εὐεργέτην εὐνοίᾳ τε καὶ φιλίᾳ, 6.44, p. 150, lines 11–12), ideals that the lusty horse belonging to Sokles does not get the opportunity to demonstrate. Furthermore, the playful sporting wherein "the boy, mounting the dolphin like a rider upon a young horse, used to sit upon him splendidly while his *erastês* swam beneath him" (ὁ παῖς ἀναβαίνων ὡς πῶλον ἵπποτης, ὑπονηχομένου τοῦ ἑραστοῦ γαῦρος ἐφέζετο, 6.15.13–15) clearly recalls the too easy mounting of the horse by Sokles (ἀναβαίνοντος ἑαυτὸν παρεῖχεν εὐπειθῆ, 6.44, p. 150, line 23).

But whereas it is only ever implied by Aelian that Sokles shared the erotic feelings of his horse, Aelian here explicitly marks the *erôs* between boy and dolphin as being reciprocal. It is precisely this emotional and physical reciprocity, though, that invites their own destruction: "not long afterwards, however, even this reciprocal/rival lover was overcome by divine envy" (οὐ μέντοι μετὰ μακρὸν καὶ οὗτος ὁ ἀντερῶν ἠττήθη τοῦ φθόνου, *NA* 6.15, p. 137, lines 14–15). I will return in the next section to the connection in Aelian's thought between *anterôs* ("reciprocal love/erotic rivalry") and divine envy, but for the moment it is worth considering the outrageous, tragicomic conclusion of the boy's romance with the dolphin:

ἔτυχε γοῦν ὁ παῖς πλείω γυμνασάμενος, καὶ καμῶν ἑαυτὸν τῷ ὀχοῦντι κατὰ τὴν γαστέρα ἐπιβάλλει, καὶ πῶς ἔτυχεν ἢ τοῦ ζώου ἄκανθα ἢ κατὰ τοῦ νώτου ὀρθή οὔσα, καὶ τῷ ὠραίῳ τὸν ὀμφαλὸν κεντεῖ. εἰτά τινες φλέβες ὑπορρήγνυνται, καὶ αἵματος ἔπειτα ῥοή πολλή, καὶ ὁ παῖς ἐνταῦθα ἀποθνήσκει. ὅπερ οὖν ὁ δελφίς συναισθόμενος... καὶ θεασάμενος πορφυροῦν ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τὸ πέλαγος, τὸ πραχθὲν συνῆκε καὶ ἐπιβῶναι τοῖς παιδικοῖς οὐκ ἐτόλμησε. πολλῇ τοίνυν τῇ ῥώμῃ χρησάμενος, ὥσπερ οὖν ῥοθίῳ σκάφος, εἰτα ἑαυτὸν εἰς τοὺς αἰγιαλοὺς ἐλκῶν ἐξέβρασε, καὶ τὸν νεκρὸν συνεξήνεγκε, καὶ ἔκειντο ἄμφω ὁ μὲν τεθνεώς, ὁ δὲ ψυχόρραγῶν. (*NA* 6.15, p. 137, lines 15–26)

The boy at any rate happened to exercise too much in the gymnasium, and, worn out, he threw himself belly downwards upon his carrier, and somehow the spiny thorn on the creature's back happened to be erect, and it pierced the beautiful boy's navel. Accordingly, some arteries were cut from beneath and there was then a great flow of blood, and the boy died there. The dolphin, therefore, when he became aware of it . . . and seeing the sea growing purple from the blood, he understood what had been done and he did not have the courage to survive his beloved. Then using much strength, like a ship carried by dashing waves, then dragging cast himself upon the shore, and he brought the boy's corpse out of the water with himself, and they both lay there, the one already dead, the other letting his soul break loose from life.

Unlike the exceedingly holy and consequently benign *anterôs* of the boy and dolphin couple from Poroselene, the *anterôs* binding the pair from Iasos has a greater narrative intensity because of its injection of horsy sexuality. As I mentioned above, Aelian's account intermingles elements from both comedy and tragedy. The outrageous image, for example, of the boy's piercing by the dolphin's erect dorsal spine is described with the word κεντεῖν, a verb whose sexual innuendo was established by the poets of Athenian comedy.⁴⁸ But the comedy is offset, if not enhanced, by the solemn narrative tone and by the tragic diction of a Euripidean verb like ψυχορραγεῖν, describing the dying dolphin (cf. *Alc.* 20, *HF* 324). However much idealized, this *erôs* between boy and dolphin connotes also an excessive care for the body (πλείω γυμνασάμενος, *NA* 6.15, p. 137, line 15) that simultaneously evokes the coarse humor of comedy and finds its ultimate consummation in tragic death.

The scene's literary association with tragedy becomes explicit when Aelian compares the dolphin of Iasos with the lover from Euripides' play *Khrusippos* and apostrophizes his favorite classical poet directly: "but, noble Euripides, Laios did not do this for Khrusippos, even though, as you yourself say and as common report teaches, he was the very first of the Greeks to introduce the *erôs* for males" (Λάϊος δὲ ἐπὶ Χρυσίππῳ, ὃ καλὲ Εὐριπίδη, τοῦτο οὐκ ἔδρασε, καίτοι τοῦ τῶν ἀρρένων ἔρωτος, ὡς λέγεις αὐτὸς καὶ ἡ φήμη διδάσκει, Ἑλλήνων πρῶτιστος ἄρξας, 6.15, p. 137, lines 26–29).⁴⁹ In his reconstruction of Euripides' lost play, William Poole has suggested that the chorus may have advocated "fertility and marriage as a higher goal than the sterile and violent passion of Laius," concluding that the play "contained the earliest example known to us in Greek literature of a debate between exponents of heterosexual and homosexual values."⁵⁰ More

⁴⁸ Henderson 1991: 178–179.

⁴⁹ See also *VH* 2.21.

⁵⁰ Poole 1990: 148.

recently, James Davidson has proposed that the myth of Khrusippos may reflect “Athenian homosexual anxieties about the proximity of Striplings and Boys in the gymnasium.”⁵¹ Both Poole and Davidson therefore see Euripides’ *Khrusippos* as responding to fifth-century concerns about the morality of non-procreative sexual desire and in particular of casting the free-born boy in the role of sexual object. Aelian’s tale, however, speaks to a different anxiety. On the one hand, and in contrast with the dangerous sexuality between Sokles and his horse, the *anterôs* between boy and dolphin is here given a lavish narrative eulogy, and their public activity was enviable (ἀξιόζηλον, *NA* 6.15, p. 137, line 5) to the people of Iasos and to foreigners alike. The story’s tragic conclusion on the other hand represents an anxiety, abiding into the Roman Imperial period, about the seemingly boundless capacity of boys to reciprocate the intense *erôs* of even the most unlikely of lovers.

Anterôs and the myths of Nerites

Aelian further elaborates on the problematic sexuality of *anterôs* in a crucial mythological narrative in Book 14 of the *NA*. His subject is the spiral-shaped shellfish known as the *nêritês*, and about the origins of this shellfish there are two accounts in circulation, both of which receive full narrative treatment.⁵² Curiously, Aelian feels he must defend his decision: “indeed even to tell some short stories in the midst of a long text is only to relieve the ear and to inject some pleasure into the narrative” (καὶ μέντοι καὶ διαμυθολογήσαι μικρὰ ἅττα ἐν μακρᾷ τῇ συγγραφῇ οὐδὲν ἄλλ’ ἢ διαναπαῦσαι τε τὴν ἀκοήν καὶ ἐφηδῦναι τὸν λόγον, *NA* 14.28, p. 354, lines 1–3). Aelian begins by demonstrating that these stories deviate from the mythological traditions of Homer and Hesiod. According to the poets, Doris, the daughter of Okeanos, and the sea-god Nereus were the parents of fifty daughters. But Homer and Hesiod are silent about the only son of Doris and Nereus, the boy Nerites, the most beautiful of humans and gods, who is sung about in “tales from the sea” (λόγοι θαλάττιοι, line 8).

In the first of the two stories, Nerites is the beloved of Aphrodite, who delighted to spend time with him in the sea. But when the time came for Aphrodite to be enrolled among the Olympian gods at the summons of her father, she wanted to bring Nerites along with her as her companion

⁵¹ Davidson 2007: 234.

⁵² On the *nêritês* mollusk, see also Arist. *HA* 530a7–25 and Opp. *H.* 1.315. Athenaeus quotes verses by Epikharmos that refer to shellfish known as *anaritai* (Ath. 85d, 86a). Plin. *Nat.* 9.130 may refer to the *nêritês*. See also Thompson 1947: 176, and Bermejo Barrera 1980.

and playmate. Nerites, however, refused, preferring to remain with his sisters and parents and rejecting a life on Olympus. Aphrodite even gave him wings, but Nerites disdained the divine gift. Rebuffed and angered, Aphrodite transformed Nerites into the spiral-shaped shellfish we know today and gave his wings to Eros, choosing him instead of Nerites as her attendant and servant.

The second story, however, declares that Poseidon fell in love with Nerites, and that Nerites loved Poseidon in return, and that it was from this that the famous Anteros was born (ὁ δὲ ἄλλος λόγος ἐρασθῆναι βοᾶ Νηρίτου Ποσειδῶνα, ἀντερᾶν δὲ τοῦ Ποσειδῶνος, καὶ τοῦ γε ὑμνουμένου Ἀντέρωτος ἐντεῦθεν τὴν γένεσιν ὑπάρξασθαι, *NA* 14.28, p. 354, lines 22–25). What follows is a scene that parallels the playful sporting of the boys and their dolphins: the beloved spends the rest of his time with his lover (συνδιατρίβειν οὖν τὰ τε ἄλλα τῷ ἐραστῇ τὸν ἐρώμενον, lines 25–26) and when Poseidon drives his chariot through the waves, the other sea creatures, including dolphins, cannot keep up with the speed of his horses. His boyfriend alone accompanies him and remains very close (μόνα δὲ ἄρα τὰ παιδικὰ οἱ παρομαρτεῖν καὶ μάλα πλησίον, p. 355, lines 2–3). Even this apparently chaste vignette, however, betrays hints of sex. There is certainly a sexual innuendo, for example, in the verb συνδιατρίβειν: Nerites is clearly not just “spending time” with his lover.⁵³ Furthermore, what does it mean for the beloved to get “very close” (μάλα πλησίον) to his lover?

The scene begs comparison with the encomium of *erôs* in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. The beloved, says Socrates, eventually overcomes the embarrassment and shame of being slandered by his schoolfellows or others, since they say that “it is disgraceful to get close to a lover” (αἰσχρὸν ἐρῶντι πλησιάζειν, *Pl. Phdr.* 255a5). That this is a sexual euphemism becomes clear shortly afterwards, when Socrates says that the beloved is in possession of *anterôs* (ἀντέρωτα ἔχων, 255e1) and desires “to see, to touch, to be intimate, to lie down together with” his lover, “and indeed, as is likely, he does what happens next.” When they are in bed together (ἐν οὖν τῇ συγκοιμήσει, 255e4–5), the boy, “swelling with a desire that he does not understand, throws his arms around his lover and kisses him” (256a2), and “whenever they lie down together, he is in such a state that he would not refuse on his part to gratify his lover if he should ask to have it” (256a3–5). With its own *erastês/erômenos* pair, its own chariot and horses, and its commemoration of the birth of Anteros, Aelian’s myth clearly evokes the Platonic intertext

⁵³ Henderson 1991: 176.

and thereby establishes a powerful sexual subtext for the romance between Nerites and Poseidon.⁵⁴

The Platonic intertext furthermore hints at the shame implicit in Nerites' choice to return the affections of his lover Poseidon: just as the anonymous *erômenos* in Socrates' speech had to endure the embarrassing taunts of schoolfellows and others who thought it "disgraceful to get close to a lover," so, one supposes, Nerites too felt the normative censure of friends and peers for his questionable behavior. The reader will remember, too, that Socrates offers the lavish eulogy of a boy's *anterôs* for his lover in the *Phaedrus* as a recantation for earlier speeches that Socrates characterizes as immoral and blasphemous for their thesis that an *erômenos* should grant sexual favors only to a cool and calculating non-lover (230e–241d). Socrates conjures his idealized myth of *anterôs* therefore as a means of combating or neutralizing social anxiety that there was something untoward in pederastic relationships in which the boy appeared too ardent in returning the affections of his lover.⁵⁵ Leaving aside the social concern regarding penetration and the subsequent damage done to the boy's honor,⁵⁶ there would have been questions about the aesthetic judgment of a boy who found the mature body of his lover beautiful. The bodies of boys and women were generally acknowledged as beautiful within Greek culture and so therefore appropriate as objects of desire. It was, however, unacceptable for a boy or a man to conceive of sexual desire for the body of an adult male: that the youthful Alcibiades behaved as if he had conceived of such a desire for Socrates was a sign of his *paranomia*, his perversion of social conventions, and the few epigrams by Strato (second century CE) celebrating the hirsute bodies of boys past their prime were decidedly countercultural, exceptions that proved the rule.⁵⁷ Pederastic relationships may have been normative from the Classical period onward, but the emotional and sexual reciprocity of the *erômenos* for his *erastês* remained even up to Aelian's time a question fraught with moral and philosophical complications. From this perspective, the ardent emotional and sexual involvement of Nerites with his bearded lover Poseidon may be seen as transgressing pederastic conventions.

What follows in Aelian's narrative disrupts the romance between Nerites and Poseidon, for Helios was resentful and therefore turned the boy into

⁵⁴ On the fusion of sexual and philosophical *erôs* in the *Phaedrus*, see Halperin 1986: 60–80, and Nussbaum 2001: 200–234. Gaca 2003: 38, on the other hand, insists that for Plato sexual and philosophical *erôs* remain mutually exclusive. Aelian, I contend, exploits precisely this ambiguity.

⁵⁵ On sexual reciprocity in Plato's *Phaedrus*, see Halperin 1986. ⁵⁶ Foucault 1985: 204–214.

⁵⁷ Pl. *Smp.* 217e–219e; *Anthologia Palatina* 12.4, 9, 10, and 178; on the epigrams, see Cantarella 2002: 39.

the spiral shellfish that he is now. Though the story does not provide an explanation for the sun's resentment and anger, the narrative silence on this point affords Aelian the opportunity to conjecture: "if one must make an interpretation based on lack of evidence, then Poseidon and Helios are said to be rivals in their love for the boy" (εἰ δέ τι χρή συμβαλεῖν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀτεκμάρτων, λέγονται ἀντερᾶν Ποσειδῶν καὶ Ἥλιος, *NA* 14.28, p. 355, lines 8–10). This interpretation is playfully based upon the double meaning of the word *anterôs* and its verbal equivalent *anterân*: the intense reciprocal love between *erastês* and *erômenos* inevitably invites an erotic rivalry. Aelian then makes a further conjecture: "and perhaps Helios was vexed because he was moving about in the sea, and he wanted him to be numbered not among the sea monsters, but to be borne aloft among the stars" (καὶ ἡγανάκτει μὲν ἴσως ὁ Ἥλιος, ὡς ἐν θαλάττῃ φερόμενος, ἐβούλετό τε αὐτὸν οὐκ ἐν τοῖς κήτεσιν ἀριθμείσθαι, ἀλλ' ἐν ἄστροις φέρεσθαι, lines 10–12).

The erotic implications of Aelian's interpretation corroborate suspicions about the boy's putatively perverse sexual desire for Poseidon. If there was a narrative anxiety in earlier stories about the boy's sexual desire for horse or dolphin, here the objectionable object of desire is not an animal, but a monstrous figure nonetheless: the bearded adult male.⁵⁸ Helios' putative wish for the boy to be borne aloft to the stars therefore reflects his wish to transform a beastly sexual relationship with the charioteer of the sea into something more sublime, a heavenly ascent. Helios' failure in this regard should be considered alongside Aphrodite's similar failure in the first version of the myth. Spurning a heavenly existence twice over, and rejecting not only the sun god but also Ouranian Aphrodite herself, the boy Nerites emphatically declares his commitment to a more earthy erotic existence. But it is here, Aelian informs us, among the monsters, where the exceedingly holy, celebrated *anterôs* is born.⁵⁹

Further, the boy's transformation commemorates his physical beauty: Aelian declares at the opening of this chapter that the boy now "is a spiral-shaped shell in the sea, small in size, but most beautiful to look at" (Κόχλος ἐστὶ θαλάττιος, μικρὸς μὲν τὸ μέγεθος, ἰδεῖν δὲ ὠραϊότατος, *NA* 14.28, p. 353, lines 25–26). A separate chapter on a similar spiral-shaped

⁵⁸ In a brief article on *NA* 14.28, Bermejo Barrera focuses not on the *anterôs* between Nerites and Poseidon but on Aelian's treatment of Nerites as a Greek bride reluctant to leave her home and join the household of her new husband (1980: 130). This interpretation, while provocative, does not, however, acknowledge that although Nerites refuses the heavenly existence offered by Aphrodite and Helios, he is hardly reluctant to join Poseidon; on the contrary, Nerites cannot get enough of Poseidon.

⁵⁹ Cf. Aelian's version of the tragic *anterôs* of the Athenians Meletos and Timagoras, fr. 69 Hercher, 72 Domingo-Forasté; see Paus. 1.30.1 and Davidson 2007.

shell, different apparently only in size, reveals more specifically what Aelian means by “most beautiful”: “for the shell is purple, and it has also a full spiral that has been adorned with flowers and dappled by nature. And it has remarkable ornamentation – you’d say that it looks like a crown because of its multicolored quality, woven in varied manner from flowers of green, gold, and vermilion, the colors dispersed alternately at equal intervals.” (NA 11.21). Nerites has become, in other words, a physical specimen in miniature of the very book that the reader holds in her hands: a garland in bloom, an emblem of *poikilia* and the polychromatic gifts of Helios. Paradoxically, however, this flowering assemblage is bound to the realm of Poseidon to memorialize forever the reciprocal desire to which he gave birth.

On the surface, therefore, it would appear that in all of these stories, Aelian reinforces the Platonic ideals of a chaste *erôs* whose goal is not the satisfaction of bodily desires but the philosophical contemplation of and communion with true heavenly beauty. Sexual intercourse is discussed frequently in the NA, but when it is a topic of discussion, Aelian refers to it disparagingly as *lagneia* (“copulation”). *Lagneia* itself, however, is not inherently repugnant, but rather the way in which it is conducted. When an exhibition is made of sex or when it is indiscriminate or immoderate, *lagneia* is censured, as are those creatures that are *lagnistatoi*.⁶⁰ Aelian’s elephants, by contrast, praised for their extreme modesty and for only copulating once in their lives and for reproductive purposes, reflect a contemporary philosophical disapproval of non-procreative sex (see the first section of this chapter).⁶¹ This philosophical disapproval had its origins in Pythagorean thought, but it was appropriated in Rome by the likes of Seneca and Musonius, and in the century before Aelian was composing the NA, procreationism was being defined as a central tenet of Christian sexual ethics.⁶² It is therefore not surprising that *erôs* is idealized in Aelian’s text when it is reciprocal and when it seems more like *philia*: a love of warm feelings, a spiritual love.⁶³ In these human–animal romances, it might even seem as if there is no sex going on at all. But Aelian’s text also demonstrates that there are layers of subterfuge, and I have shown in all of my readings that Aelian’s narratives are self-consciously aware of the conventionality of such sanitized erotic conceptualizations. That this dual mentality exists in the NA is perhaps not surprising when one considers that Aelian was writing in the decades when Philostratus celebrated the

⁶⁰ NA 1.2, 3.16, 4.1, 4.5–6, 4.12, 4.17, 6.27–28, 7.19, 8.16, 10.14, 12.10, 15.19.

⁶² Gaca 2003: 94–115.

⁶³ Thus Korhonen 2012: 68–69.

⁶¹ NA 8.16.

transcendent philosophical *askêsis* of Apollonios of Tyana, and Cassius Dio simultaneously enraged and aroused his readers by graphically exaggerating and/or fabricating the transgressive sexual exploits of the emperor Elagabalus. James Davidson's exploration of the paradoxical relationship between pleasure and pedantry throughout Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai* is apt. Beginning from the premise that the subject of the *Deipnosophistai* "is pleasure and yet it is far from pleasurable to read,"⁶⁴ Davidson concludes that Athenaeus' "banquet becomes a banquet of Tantalus, thanks to a simple rule: you cannot talk properly with your mouth full. The feast of words is a feast of not eating, an anti-feast. That frustration we often encounter in reading this scholarly text on pleasure is a frustration shared by Athenaeus' guests."⁶⁵ In other words, Athenaeus' elaboration of his lengthy sympotic compendium is generated by the tension between the desire to satisfy physical pleasures (sexual, gastronomic, aesthetic, etc.) and the eternal deferral of such pleasures.⁶⁶ Contemporary erotic narratives also engage in this literary seduction: most famously, perhaps, the scene of Daphnis' initiation into the mysteries of *erôs* by the predatory "little wolf" Lukainion in Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* (3.18) titillates by playing on the superior erotic knowingness of the reader, who, as Goldhill puts it, "is tempted to pierce the veil of euphemism."⁶⁷ This juxtaposition and blending of sexual abstinence and prurience characterizes also Aelian's text and could even be said to be a defining feature of literature from the Severan period.

It remains to consider in what sense Aelian imagines himself to be a lover. I have in mind here not the biographical sketch of Aelian in Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists*, which offers the image of a man of questionable virility who avoided making children by never marrying⁶⁸ – though these details are most tantalizing (see [Chapter 1](#)). Rather, Aelian's own erotic self-representation within the pages of the *NA* is revealing. At one point Aelian refers to himself as a "red-hot lover of truth" (ἀληθείας ἐραστὴν διάπυρον, *NA* 2.11, p. 33, line 14), and in the crucial epilogue of his animal miscellany, he declares that, "passion for learning inflames me" (ἐρως με σοφίας . . . ἐξέκαυσεν, ep., p. 430, lines 7–8). Aelian therefore represents himself not as a philosopher, but as something more intense, more passionate, but also a little bit shifty, and not without a sense of humor. Though he draws heavily on the language of philosophical (especially Stoic) discourse throughout the *NA*, nowhere in the text does Aelian refer to himself explicitly as a "philosopher" (φιλόσοφος) or as "engaged in

⁶⁴ Davidson 2000: 292.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 303.

⁶⁶ On Athenaeus as an ur-pornographer, see Henry 2000.

⁶⁷ Goldhill 1995: 27.

⁶⁸ Philostr. *VS* 625.

philosophy” (φιλοσοφῶν). And elsewhere in the epilogue, it becomes clear that what Aelian means by “truth” is not an objective reality *per se*, but a literary conceit: he is showing off the Protean truths that he has found in books (see [Chapter 6](#)). This is far from claiming a commitment to philosophical ideals, and at one point in the *NA* Aelian even declares that he has no time for philosophizing (οὐ μοι σχολὴ φιλοσοφεῖν νῦν, 5.1, p. 100, line 18).⁶⁹ We are reminded, furthermore, by figures like Achilles Tatius, Lucian, and Alciphron that it was a commonplace for sophistic writers of the second and third centuries to ironize high-minded philosophizing, especially in the area of sexual morality.⁷⁰ Though Aelian appropriates the language and imagery of philosophical discourse, and though he proclaims his commitment to philosophy, he is also equally interested in the play of writing, as when he defends his decision “to inject some pleasure into the narrative” (ἐφηδῦναι τὸν λόγον, 14.28, p. 354, line 3) with his stories about the boy Nerites.⁷¹ When therefore the sophist styles himself as a “red-hot lover of truth” and claims to be inflamed by an ἔρως σοφίας, we may be justified in reading an invitation to an equally sophisticated and playful hermeneutics of *erôs*, even if that means we must, to use Aelian’s own phrase, “make an interpretation based on lack of evidence” (εἰ δέ τι χρὴ συμβαλεῖν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀτεκμάρτων, lines 8–9). But evidence for the richness of nature’s erotic permutations is everywhere at hand in Aelian’s narratives. Even at their most modest, Aelian’s stories cannot entirely conceal the earthy, animal sexuality that abides just beneath the surface.

Conclusion

The expressions of conservative morality regarding sexual behavior and gender identity, authorized by Stoic and Pythagorean doctrine, must not be understood as the final word on sex and gender in the *NA*. In fact, Aelian’s animal miscellany just as often suspends the abjective response to non-normative sexual behaviors and gender presentations, invoking instead a solemnizing response that allows for a positive moral exploration of such “perversions.”

The chapter on the sexual life of elephants, for example, appears to reinforce the Pythagorean ideal of abstention from sex except for purposes

⁶⁹ See also *NA* 8.27.

⁷⁰ Cf. Ach. Tat. 8.5.7, 8.9; Luc. *DMetr.* 10; Ath. 13.584a; Alciph. 4.7 Schepers. See Goldhill 1995: 98–99.

⁷¹ We might profitably think of Aelian as a Derridean reader of Plato: “Derrida sees Plato, in his emphasis on truth, presence, and speaking as aware of yet caught in the same contradiction as all thinkers who follow him” (DuBois 1982: 9).

of procreation. The implication is that, if Pythagoreanism is in line with the natural law governing elephant behavior, then Pythagorean sexual morality must itself be a natural law. But the *NA* shows in numerous passages that nature is also responsible for the licentious, decidedly *non*-procreative sexual practices of many other species. The argument from nature, therefore, such as that suggested by the story of Pythagorean elephants and as it appears within the broader context of the *poikilia* of the *NA*, is not irrefutable and reflecting an immutable, transcendent law, but just one more ideologically motivated strategy of persuasion.

Similarly, the abjective response to male effeminacy, both in the *NA* and elsewhere in Aelian's literary corpus, is offset by the solemnizing response towards those creatures in the natural world that either are born with dual sexuality or behave in ways that are disruptive to normative notions of sex and gender. This interpretative approach is validated not just by Aelian's countercultural authorial persona but also by the *poikilia* and the paradoxographical interests of his work.

Aelian's numerous stories of interspecies eroticism further erode conventional sexual morality. Aelian seems, on the one hand, to uphold the classical Platonic paradigm of a chaste, heavenly *erôs* and also to reinforce the Stoic categorization whereby humans are elevated above irrational beasts through their participation in such an *erôs*. The sophistic nature of the text, on the other hand, reveals that such a physically chaste, Platonic *erôs* is a facade, as Aelian's allusive prose offers the reader alternative possibilities. In the *NA*, the "monstrous" truths of sex that lurk beneath the surface of even the seemingly purest *erôs* refuse to be silenced.

The human-animal romances of the *NA* are a key to understanding Aelian's elaborate myth of the boy Nerites, transformed by a jealous Helios into the most beautiful of dappled shellfish because of his reciprocal sexual desire for the god Poseidon. The story is an eloquent reminder that "monstrous" sexual desire is not restricted to the outrageous stories of sexual bestiality found in the *NA*, but applies also to the desire for the bearded adult male, long censured within Greco-Roman culture. But according to Aelian's rebellious myth, which solemnizes the objectionable, it is out of such "perverse" desire that the exceedingly holy god Anteros is born.

Bees, lions, eagles: Aelian and kingship

The literary tradition of offering advice to kings, which flourished during the Hellenistic period in the Greek East and was revived in the Roman Imperial context at the end of the first century CE by Dio of Prusa, underwent a transition in Rome in the early third century. Dio of Prusa composed two of his four orations *On Kingship* (*Peri basileias*, D.Chr. 1 and 3) as dramatically delivered in the presence of the emperor Trajan himself, and the two others (2 and 4), offering the imagined advice given by Philip of Macedon and the philosopher Diogenes to Alexander the Great, seem to suggest presentation before Trajan. Though the Imperial setting for the orations is probably a fiction,¹ Dio's orations *On Kingship* were nevertheless an innovation to a tradition in which, in previous centuries, the epistolary form was the preferred means of communicating admonitions and advice to kings.² Dio, who had already suffered in exile because of the tyranny of Domitian, now represented his very body as placed before the new *princeps* as he offered his philosophical counsel.

Dio's powerful literary gesture, reasserting the relevance of the intellectual and man of letters before the emperor, continued to be popular into the Severan age. Another Dio – the Bithynian senator Cassius Dio – incorporated a similar scene into his grand history when he set the famous speech of Maecenas before Octavian in Book 52. In that speech, Maecenas counters Agrippa's advice that Octavian should relinquish his authority to the senate (D.C. 52.2–13); Maecenas, by contrast, supports Octavian's monarchical control of the empire, but counsels him with commonplaces from the tradition of kingship literature (52.14–18) as well as more specific measures that were relevant in the early third century, whether Dio

¹ Whitmarsh 2001: 325–327; Sidebottom 2006, however, maintains the historicity of the Imperial performance.

² Sidebottom 2006: 145–149.

composed the speech during the reign of Caracalla or Alexander Severus (52.19–40).³

A similar scene plays out in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*, where three philosophers, Euphrates, Dio of Prusa, and Apollonios, are each invited by Vespasian to offer their own advice about how he should best rule after Rome's sequence of wicked tyrannies (VA 5.31–36). Euphrates proposes a return to democracy (5.33.5), while Dio of Prusa proposes that Vespasian set the question before the Roman people to let them decide for themselves how they wish to be governed, whether by the rule of the people or by a king (5.34.3). Apollonios, however, advises Vespasian to sustain the monarchy, which in its ideal execution is really no different than democracy at its best. Apollonios bolsters his argument with an analogy from the world of nature: "I do not think it right that the herd of human beings be destroyed for their lack of a just and prudent herdsman" (5.35.4). After offering such justifications for kingship, Apollonios then offers a sequence of more practical advice (5.36), just as Maecenas had done for Octavian in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*. Philostratus therefore cleverly reinvents Apollonios as the figure whose advice on kingship before Vespasian would later inspire Dio of Prusa's own orations *On Kingship* before the emperor Trajan. As Harry Sidebottom puts it, "Philostratus has stolen from Dio to create his picture of Apollonius, while ironically suggesting that Dio stole from Apollonius."⁴

As in the Dionic orations, the perpetuation of "on kingship" literature by Cassius Dio and by Philostratus is by no means straightforward. Each author offers an oblique stylization of the tradition, reasserting the validity of the gesture of speaking out before the emperor, while at the same time declining to re-enact that gesture *in propria persona*. Fergus Millar dates Cassius Dio's composition of Maecenas' speech to Octavian to the end of 214 CE, when the historian was with Caracalla in Nicomedia, and he even imagines the possibility that Dio read the speech before the emperor, "a sign of considerable courage in view of its contents."⁵ But this is, of course, pure speculation on Millar's part, imposing onto a Severan context a putatively historical scene in which Dio of Prusa addressed Trajan directly.

³ Millar 1964: 102–118 and Manuwald 1979: 22 n. 55 posit composition under Caracalla. For composition under Alexander Severus, see Bowersock 1973: 203 n. 1. Hammond 1932 sees the speech not as a political pamphlet but as a description of the principate as he knew it. On Maecenas' remarks on the imperial cult, see Fishwick 1990.

⁴ Sidebottom 2006: 135. ⁵ Millar 1964: 104.

There is an instructive difference between Dio's orations *On Kingship* and the literary refashionings by Cassius Dio and Philostratus. The advice on kingship offered by Dio of Prusa, though incorporating historical fictions (via the dialogues between Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great and between Diogenes and Alexander), offered itself within orations that purported or seemed to be delivered before the emperor. Dio's orations, in other words, even if they are literary fictions, take the form of speech acts. Cassius Dio and Philostratus, however, safely distance themselves from the scene of the intellectual's philosophical admonishment of the emperor by embedding it within historiographical and biographical frames. The imagined scene of Dio addressing Trajan was clearly not so potent as to motivate Cassius Dio and Philostratus to deliver orations before Caracalla himself in their own voices. The literary stylizations of Cassius Dio and Philostratus suggest an anxiety that the Dionic gesture would have been impossible; to speak-act like the orator in Dio's orations before an emperor such as Caracalla would have meant certain death. Indirectness was, therefore, required.⁶

Aelian is equally interested in kingship, but his literary stylization of the traditional themes of the discourse is more radically indirect than those of Cassius Dio and Philostratus, illustrating the futility of the intellectual's attempts at meaningful communication with the sovereign. Consistent with his rhetorical turn away from public life, rejecting a career declaiming at the imperial court, Aelian jettisons entirely the declamatory scenario in his treatment of kingship. Instead, Aelian shows us the bits and pieces of a long tradition, the many facets of a discourse that could be combined and shifted either to idealize the noble king or to vilify him as a monster, depending on the context and motivations of the orator. In what follows, I focus on Aelian's depictions of three animals associated with kingship in the *NA* – the bee, the lion, and the eagle – to show how for Aelian there was an ever-widening gulf between the ideal of the philosopher king and the more familiar realities of violent tyranny. Unmoored from any single, overarching historical narrative, Aelian's fragments on the kings of beasts suggest that the nature of kingship is ultimately as unstable and mutable as its symbolic vocabulary. In which case, no matter how eloquent and persuasive the philosopher who may wish to guide the king, the act of kingship itself must be left to the king, and about that situation, Aelian is rightly pessimistic.

⁶ Cf. Schöner 1873: 14–18.

The hive and social organization

Aelian seems to have culled most of his information on bees from the *Historia animalium* of Aristotle, whether from the pages of Aristotle himself, from the epitome of Aristophanes of Byzantium, or some other intermediary author.⁷ But whereas Aristotle offers an objective, scientific description of the bee and its life, Aelian uses that Aristotelian description as the basis for a moralizing interpretation. For Aelian, the bee and its hive life represent an ideal in social organization, and they are as worthy of the Greek ethnographer's attention as, for example, the Persians, a comparison that elevates bee society and suggests for them the possession of an alien wisdom. But bees surpass the Persians even, for while Aelian exalts the palaces of Cyrus the Great and of Dareios and the *paradeison* of Cyrus the Younger, the dwellings of bees command greater wonder because their construction was not based on the violence of tyranny. Persian kings, says Aelian, "accomplished what they accomplished by imposing much suffering on many, but there is nothing more beneficent than bees, since neither is there anything more wise" (ἐκεῖνοι μὲν γὰρ πολὺ καὶ πολλοὺς λυπήσαντες εἰργάσαντο ὅσα εἰργάσαντο· οὐδὲν δὲ ἄρα ἦν μελιττῶν εὐχαριτώτερον, ἐπεὶ μηδὲ σοφώτερον ἦν, *NA* 1.59). In typical fashion, Aelian idealizes nature's expression of a society based on monarchy, but the parallel expression among human beings is found to be deficient.

The natural *sophia* of bees is expressed especially in the intelligent design of their dwellings:

πρώτους μὲν γὰρ ἐργάζονται τοὺς θαλάμους τοὺς τῶν βασιλέων, καὶ εὐρυχωρίαν ἔχουσιν οὗτοι, καὶ εἰσὶν ἀνώτεροι· καὶ ἔρκος δὲ περιβάλλουσι τούτοις, οἷονεὶ τεῖχος εἶναι καὶ περίβολον, ἀποσεμνύνουσιν καὶ ἐκ τούτων τὴν οἶκον τὴν βασιλείον. διαιροῦσι δὲ ἑαυτὰς εἰς τρία καὶ οὖν καὶ τὰς οἰκῆσεις τὰς ἑαυτῶν εἰς τοσαῦτα. αἱ μὲν γὰρ πρεσβύταται καὶ αἱ παλαιόταται γειτνιῶσι τῇ τῶν βασιλέων αὐλῇ, οἷονεὶ δορυφόροι καὶ φρουροὶ οὔσαι, αἱ δὲ νεώταται καὶ αἱ αὐτοετεῖς μετὰ ταύτας οἰκοῦσιν, αἱ δὲ ἐν ἡβῇ καὶ ἄκμῃ οὔσαι ἑξωτέρω ἐκείνων, ὥς εἶναι τὰς μὲν πρεσβυτάτας φρουροὺς τῶν βασιλέων, τὰς δὲ νεάνιδας ἔρκος τῶν νεωτάτων. (*NA* 1.59)

For first they make the chambers of the kings, and these have plenty of room and are higher up. And they even surround these with a defense, as if it is a wall and palisade, thereby lending solemnity to the royal dwelling. And they divide themselves into three and thus also their dwellings into just as many. For the most senior and the oldest neighbor the palace of the kings,

⁷ Arist. *HA* 5.21–24 (553b4–555a18), 9.40–43 (623b5–629b5). On the image of the bee in sophistic *paideia*, see Morgan 1998: 262–271.

as if being bodyguards and protectors, and the youngest and their age-mates dwell after these, but those in the prime of youth in the exterior beyond them, the result being that, while the most senior are the protectors of the kings, the youthful ones are a defense for the youngest.

The detail that the eldest of the bees serve as the kings' bodyguards is a refrain from an earlier, shorter entry (1.9). In a later chapter, we learn that the task of the eldest bees is not just to protect the king, but also to guard the hive, and the hive is divided into three classes according to age and duty: some distribute water, some mold the wax of the hive, and others forage (5.11, p. 106, lines 1–5). The hive therefore represents an ideally ordered society, with each class of citizen performing its allotted duty.

Aelian's chapters on the social life of bees invite comparison with Plato's *Republic*, the central text of ancient Greek political theory. Though the idealized hive of the *NA* is indebted to the ideal state theorized by Plato's Socrates, Aelian reinvests the bee with noble qualities, since for Socrates the bee was primarily a symbol of sweetness and pleasure, enticements to moral corruption for the individual and, consequently, for the state. Instead of focusing on the positive aspects of bees, i.e. the social organization of the hive, the industry of the worker bees, or the idealization of the bee king, Plato's Socrates focused on the lazy, gluttonous drone to show how the sweetness of honey – and, by extension, of poetry – could corrupt the soul and city. According to Rana Saadi Liebert, “The reconfiguration of sweetness in all forms as a toxin inimical to a healthy state and incommensurate with the philosophic values of purity and moderation allows Socrates to turn the poetic tradition [about bees and apian imagery] against itself.”⁸ Socrates' ideal state, in other words, must be free of the corrupting influence of honey, a gustatory pleasure that stands in for other, more insidious pleasures that are antithetical to the philosophical life. The guardians of Socrates' ideal state must also protect against the bee-poet, the agent who may introduce suspicious pleasures and thereby corrupt the citizenry.

Aelian preserves the Platonic anxiety about the drone's addiction to sweetness, but he also shows how the bees of a properly managed hive deal with that potentially destabilizing element of apian society. When a drone is discovered by vigilant bees to be secretly abusing the honey that has been industriously stored up during the daytime, the bees do not stand for it and thrust the seditious drone from the hive as an exile. “But not even so has [the drone] received his lesson,” says Aelian, “for he is by nature lazy and gluttonous, two evils” (ὁ δὲ οὐδ' οὕτω πεπαιδευταί·

⁸ Saadi Liebert 2010: 99.

πέφυκε γὰρ καὶ ἀργὸς καὶ λίχνος, δύο κακῶ, *NA* 1.8). When the bees exit the hive the next day to forage, the drone returns to do what he does best, “filling himself up and plundering the bees’ sweet treasure” (ἐμφορούμενος καὶ κερατίζων ἐκεῖνος τὸν θησαυρὸν τῶν μελιττῶν τὸν γλυκύν). Caught this second time, the drone is not merely beaten and exiled, for the bees now know that the drone is an enemy to the hive and that correction and instruction are impossible: “Attacking most violently, they smite the robber with their stings. And submitting to a punishment not contemptible, he pays for his greedy stomach and his shameless devouring with his life” (εὖ μάλ᾽ αὖ τοῖς κέντροις βιαίως ἐμπεσοῦσαι διαλοῶσι τὸν ληστήν· καὶ οὐ μεμπτήν ὑπομείνας τὴν τιμωρίαν, ὑπὲρ τῆς γαστριμαργίας καὶ ἀδηφαγίας τὴν ψυχὴν ἔτισεν). Apian society, too, contains within it Plato’s appetitive element,⁹ but the thumotic element within the hive, represented by the guardian bees, is strong enough to maintain the proper balance and to keep the appetitive element in check.¹⁰

Having dealt with the lazy, gluttonous drone, Aelian spends far more time elsewhere in the *NA* extolling the bee’s many virtues. “The bee,” he says, “lives a pure life and it would never eat of any living creature. And it has no need at all of Pythagoras as an advisor, but flowers are a sufficient food for it” (βίον δὲ καθαρὸν ζῇ μέλιττα, καὶ ζώου οὐκ ἂν οὐδενὸς πάσαιτό ποτε· καὶ οὐ δεῖται Πυθαγόρου συμβούλου οὐδὲ ἔν, ἀπόχρη δὲ ἄρα σῖτον αὐτῇ εἶναι τὰ ἄνθη, *NA* 5.11, p. 106, lines 25–28). In his thoroughly idealizing depiction of bees, Aelian, like Philostratus in his *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*, establishes a Pythagorean lifestyle as the positive contrast to the tyrannical excesses that he depicts elsewhere as potential qualities of lions and eagles. Also like Pythagoras, the bee is the embodiment of moderation and chastity (*sôphrosunê*), and it hates luxury (*khlidê*) and weakness (*thrupsis*), as evidenced by the fact that it pursues anyone anointed with myrrh and drives him away as an enemy. Furthermore, it knows when one has come away from a sexual encounter with another person, pursuing this one too as an enemy. In combat, they display manly courage (*andreia*) and do not turn away in fear. They are friendly towards those who bear no evil intent, but there is, as the saying goes, a “war without truce” (*polemos akêruktos*) against those who do them harm (*NA* 5.11, p. 106, line 28–p. 107, line 8; on their hatred of perfume, see also 1.58, where Aelian compares bees to girls that are *asteiai te kai sôphrones*). Once again minimizing the significance of the drone, Aelian

⁹ On the possible role of drones as guardians in the hive, see Borthwick 1990: 60–61, on *NA* 5.42.

¹⁰ Pl. *R.* 441d–442b.

highlights the bee's love of work and its hatred of laziness (5.12), and while he admits that some bees are erotic and given to physical pleasure, most bees are continent (12.34).

Over such a philosophically inclined, regimented species presides the king of bees. Especially important for Aelian is the widespread belief, mentioned by Aristotle, that the king of bees has no sting; Aristotle sets the record straight: the king does possess a sting, but he never uses it.¹¹ Aristotle's entomological insight gives Aelian an opportunity to close the first book of the *NA* by meditating on the properly continent behavior of kings:

Λέγει μὲν τις λόγος ἀκέντρους εἶναι τοὺς τούτων βασιλέας· λέγει δὲ καὶ ἕτερος καὶ πάνυ ἑρρωμένα τὰ κέντρα συμπεφυκέναι αὐτοῖς καὶ τεθηγμένα ἀνδρειότατα· οὐτε δὲ ἐπ' ἀνδρὶ ποτε χρῆσθαι αὐτοῖς οὐτε ἐπὶ ταῖς μελίτταις, ἀλλὰ ὑποπεπλάσθαι φόβον ἄλλως· μὴ γὰρ θέμις εἶναι τὸν ἄρχοντα καὶ τῶν τοσούτων ἔφορον κακὸν ἐργάσασθαι. καὶ τὰς μελίττας δὲ τὰς λοιπὰς ὁμολογοῦσιν οἱ τούτων ἐπιστήμονες ἐν ᾧ τῶν ἀρχόντων τῶν σφετέρων ὑποκλίνειν τὰ κέντρα, οἷον εἰ τῆς ἐξουσίας ἀφισταμένους καὶ παραχωρούσας. ἐκάτερον δ' ἂν τις ἐκπλαγείη τὸ τῶν βασιλέων ἐκείνων· εἴτε γὰρ μὴ ἔχουσι πόθεν ἀδικήσουσι, μέγα τοῦτο· εἴτε καὶ παρὸν ἀδικῆσαι μὴ ἀδικοῦσιν, ἀλλὰ τοῦτό γε μακρῷ κρεῖττόν ἐστιν. (*NA* 1.60)

One story says that the kings of these creatures have no sting; but a different story says that they are born with stings that are very strong and sharpened in a most virile fashion, but that they never use them against a man or against the bees, but pretend to instill fear otherwise, for it is not right that one ruling and overseeing so many should commit a wicked act. And those who know about these creatures agree that the other bees also withdraw their stings in the presence of their rulers, as if deferring and giving way to their authority. Either quality of those kings of the bees would inspire wonder: it is amazing if they lack the means to commit an injustice, but it is far more powerful if, even when it is possible for them to be unjust, they are not unjust.

Dio of Prusa even employs this commonplace about the king of bees in his fourth oration *On Kingship*, in which the Cynic philosopher Diogenes upbraids Alexander the Great for his unkingly penchant for bearing arms at all times. Alexander should be like the king of bees, who is born without a sting, which is the natural sign (*sêmeion*) of his right to rule.¹² More meaningful for Aelian, however, is the *enkrateia*, or self-mastery, required of the king who suppress violent urges even when he has his sword at his side.

¹¹ Arist. *HA* 5.21 (553b4–7).

¹² D.Chr. 4.61–64.

Aelian takes his praise of the peaceful king further: the philosophical regent who refrains from using the violent means that are granted to him by his station engenders the devotion and loyalty of his subjects. Whenever such a king leaves the hive, the other bees rally to seek him out and “bring him back to his palace” (εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν ἐπανάγουσιν, *NA* 5.10). Aelian here draws a sharp contrast between the bees’ desire to retain their good king and the human cities that drove out rulers such as Peisistratos, Dionysius of Syracuse, and others “who were lawless tyrants and unable to display the craft of kingship, which is the love of humanity and the stewardship of one’s subjects” (τυράννους τε καὶ παρανόμους ὄντας καὶ τέχνην βασιλικὴν ἀποδείξασθαι μὴ δυναμένους, ἥπερ οὖν φιλάνθρωπία τε καὶ τῶν ὑπηκόων ἐστὶ προστάσις). In return for displaying this beneficent craft of kingship (*tekhnê basilikê*), the king reinforces a bond of mutual affection between himself and his subjects. Aelian notes in this same passage that the king of bees, when grown old and infirm, is even carried about on a litter by the other bees that adore him. The reciprocal devotion between bees and their kings was a traditional motif that predated Aristotle, as evidenced by the analogy that Xenophon articulates about Cyrus the Great: “For you yourself seem to me to have been born a king by nature no less than the leader of the bees born in the hive. For the bees of their own will obey him, and wherever he might rest, no bee departs from that place. But if he might depart to some other place, no bee is left behind in the former place, so awesome a passion (δαινός τις ἔρως) is engendered in them for being ruled by him” (*X. Cyr.* 5.1.24). This passage from Xenophon is evidence of the positive tradition about bees against which Plato was reacting when his Socrates imagined the danger that drone-citizens, beguiled by pleasure, posed to his ideal city in the *Republic*. Resuscitating this positive tradition is also the way in which Aelian restores to apian society a central position in depicting an ideal of social organization and the illustration of the philosopher king.

Aelian even employs a Platonic allusion in his philosophical restoration of the bee, thereby modifying Plato with Plato’s own poetic imagery:

ὅπερ δὲ ὁ θεῖος Πλάτων περὶ τῶν τεττίγων λέγει καὶ τῆς ἐκείνων φιλωδίας τε καὶ φιλομουσίας, τοῦτ’ ἂν καὶ περὶ τοῦ τῶν μελιττῶν χοροῦ εἴποι τις. ὅταν γοῦν σκιρτήσωσιν ἢ πλανηθῶσιν, ἐνταῦθα οἱ σμηνουργοὶ κροτοῦσι κρότον τινὰ ἐμμελῆ τε καὶ συμμελῆ· αἱ δὲ ὥς ὑπὸ Σειρήνος ἔλκονται, καὶ μέντοι καὶ ὑποστρέφουσιν ἐς ἣν τὰ οἰκεῖα αὐθις. (*NA* 5.13)

And that which the divine Plato says about cicadas and their love of singing and being dear to the muses, someone would say this also about the dancing of the bees. At any rate, whenever they leap and wander about, at this point

the hive masters strike a harmonious and rhythmic beat, and the bees are drawn as if by a Siren and indeed they turn back toward their proper haunts.

Aelian portrays bees positively not just for their ideal social organization and for the beneficence of their kings, but also because they are creatures dear to the Muses, as evidenced by this anecdote about their responsiveness to the musical rhythm of their hive masters. If Socrates' primary criticism of the bee in the *Republic* is its association with sweetness and variety,¹³ Aelian neutralizes that criticism by likening bees to cicadas, the insects that Socrates famously mythologizes in an inspired passage from the *Phaedrus*. For Socrates, the cicadas were once upon a time human beings who so fell in love with singing that they thought of nothing else, neglecting food and drink until they wasted away. For their devotion, the Muses granted the cicadas a life that needed no food or drink and allowed them to sing from the moment they are born until they die. After death, at the side of the Muses, the cicadas report to their goddesses about those among men who honor them most.¹⁴

There is an aesthetic commentary here that is relevant not only to the concept of the ideal society, but also to Aelian's own literary composition. Just as the leaping and wandering of the bees must be tamed by the hive masters' musical rhythm, so the seemingly haphazard wandering of Aelian's book is tempered by his craft, as Aelian has stylized his narratives in the common literary language and has taken pains with his composition and with the beauty of its words and phrases.¹⁵ He has given free rein to his imagination as it ranges at random over the curiosities of animal lore, but he is also a productive, disciplined literary artist. The bee, therefore, figures in this sense as a symbol for Aelian's own creative activity, leaping and wandering about from topic to topic, but also obedient to the demands of his craft and devoted to the muses. The bee's association with poetry and literature was, of course, well known: in the Greek tradition, it extended back through Callimachus to the earlier lyric poets and even to Hesiod, and Aristophanes offers an archetypal image of the poet Phrunikhos as a bee gathering the fruit of ambrosial songs; within Roman culture, Aelian would have been familiar with Vergil's lavish treatment of the theme at the end of the *Georgics*.¹⁶ It is worth remembering also that, according to the evidence of the *Souda*, Aelian "was nicknamed honey-tongued or honey-voiced" (ἐπεκλήθη μελίγλωσσος ἢ μελίφθογγος, *Souda* α1- 176).

¹³ On the Platonic anxiety over *poikilia*, see Saadi Liebert 2010: 108–109.

¹⁴ Pl. *Phdr.* 258e6–259d8.

¹⁵ *NA* preface, p. 1, lines 16–17; epilogue, p. 432, lines 9–11.

¹⁶ Ar. *Av.* 748–750; Verg. *G.* 4.281–314.

Furthermore, the association between the hive and the organizational *poikilia* of the literary miscellany had already been established by the second century CE: in his preface to the *Noctes Atticae*, Aulus Gellius mentions *Kêria*, or “Honeycomb,” as the title that another writer used for a different such collection containing “learning that was varied, mixed, and, as it were, disordered” (*variam et miscellam et quasi confusaneam doctrinam*, Gel. pref. 5–6). Aelian’s literary *poikilia* may be an instrument of pleasure and therefore susceptible to philosophical criticisms, but in his chapters on the bee Aelian himself offers a Platonic rationale for his project. The writer of animal narratives studies the mysteries of nature and by means of his honeyed prose communicates a vision of the natural world as a corrective to the ills of human life. The bee specifically, which symbolically validates the philosophical significance of Aelian’s literary composition, is also the creature that offers the image of the perfect king and the perfect society.

Lions

The lion’s association with kingship extends back to Homer, whose authority in Aelian’s chapters on the lion is prominent.¹⁷ An equally important source on lions is the lore of the Egyptians, whose ancient authority validates the animal’s religious significance. While discussing the lion’s mastery over sleep, illustrated by the fact that when it appears to be sleeping it moves its tail as an outward sign of its eternal vigilance, Aelian says that it is for this reason that the Egyptians have assigned the animal to the sun, “for the sun is the most industrious of gods, in that he is either seen above the earth or making his journey downward never resting” (καὶ γὰρ τοὶ καὶ τὸν ἥλιον θεῶν ὄντα φιλοπονώτατον ἢ ἄνω τῆς γῆς ὀρᾶσθαι ἢ τὴν κάτω πορείαν ἰέναι μὴ ἡσυχάζοντα, *NA* 5.39, p. 118, lines 26–28). In the following sentence, the Egyptian and Homeric sources corroborate each other: “the Egyptians bring in Homer as a witness, who says that the sun is unceasing” (lines 28–29; cf. *Il.* 18.239). The lion’s association with the sun is picked up in a later chapter, where Aelian says that the animal is red hot (διάπυρον – a quality that Aelian applies to himself as a lover of truth, cf. *NA* 2.11, p. 33, line 14). The lion is averse to and flees the external fire because of his abundance of fire within, which is the reason why the Egyptians say he is the dwelling place of Helios, for whenever the sun is at its hottest at the height of summer, they say that it is drawing near to the heavenly Lion (*NA* 12.7, p. 284, line 16).

¹⁷ *NA* 3.27, 4.46, 5.39, 6.1. On Homer in the *NA*, see Kindstrand 1976.

The proper worship of Helios seems to have been a source of debate during the Severan period, with one tradition favoring elaborate animal sacrifices and another tradition, influenced by Pythagorean doctrine, favoring prayer and the pure offering of incense without animal sacrifice, with the latter, of course, considered more pious by the learned philosophers of Aelian's day.¹⁸ And yet, despite the lion's association with the heavenly fire of the sun, Aelian nevertheless does not depict the animal as itself transcending a carnal appetite, but emphasizes instead the lion's unvarying diet of raw meat, even in the religious context of its worship among the Egyptians. In Egypt, lions "have temples and plenty of spaces to spend time, and beef is provided for them on a daily basis, stripped of bone and tendon, and the Egyptians chant in accompaniment in their own language while the lions are feeding" (ἔχουσι νεῶς καὶ διατριβὰς εὖ μάλα ἀφθόνους, καὶ κρέα βοῶν αὐτοῖς ἐστὶν ὁσημέραι, καὶ διασπαρακτὰ κεῖται γυμνὰ ὀστέων καὶ ἰνῶν, καὶ ἐσθιόντων ἐπάδουσιν Αἰγυπτίᾳ φωνῇ, *NA* 12.7, p. 284, lines 4–7). The animals are even provided with exercise grounds in their holy precinct, "and the opponent of the well-nourished creatures is a calf. And when he has exercised against it, so that he might take it down . . . he takes his fill and then returns to his own little dwelling" (ὁ δὲ ἀντίπαλος τῶν εὐτραφῶν μόσχος. καὶ πρὸς τοῦτον γυμνασάμενος, ἵνα αὐτὸν καθέλῃ . . . ἐμπορεῖται τε καὶ ὑποστρέφει εἰς τὸ αὔλιον τὸ ἴδιον, lines 13–16). Aelian's chapters on the lion, therefore, situate the animal ambivalently between a heavenly transcendence and the carnal appetite of its belly.

Unlike the king of bees, however, which, according to Aelian, abstains from using violence to impose his will on his subjects, the lion, the king of all beasts, gains its courage from its claws and teeth (*NA* 1.30). The lion's violent behavior and the fear that he inspires, both commonplaces in the literary tradition, Aelian connects to the lion's inability to exert control over its appetitive desires. The lion is most fierce when it is hungry, most mild, even playful, when it has been sated (4.35). But by living according to the demands of his stomach, the lion becomes greedy of his prey. After gorging himself on his kill, he does not leave the carcass for other animals, but pours his noxious breath over it, marking it as his own. Other animals are fearful of the scent and stay away, not wanting "to appear to plunder and cut off anything that belongs to their own king" (δοκεῖν συλᾶν καὶ περικόπτειν τι τοῦ σφετέρου βασιλέως, 5.39, p. 119, lines 12–13). The fact that it indulges in sexual behavior at all seasons of the year, never abstaining, is a further

¹⁸ D.C. 80.11 (probably fiction); Hdn. 5.5.7–8; Philostr. *VA* 1.31.2, 2.38, 7.6, and 6.11.20.

symptom, from a Pythagorean point of view, of the lion's unregimented lifestyle (4.35).

But the lion is not just a symbol for tyrannical excess, for when it is properly cultivated, the lion's power may be beneficial. He is a brave adversary, capable of goading himself into battle when necessary (*NA* 5.39, 6.1, 13.14); even on those occasions when he realizes that he has been defeated, "The lion would never turn its back in flight, but moves back calmly looking you in the face for a time" (φύγοι δὲ οὐκ ἄν ποτε τὰ νῶτα τρέψας λέων, ἥσυχῃ δὲ ἐπὶ πόδα ἀναχωρεῖ βλέπων ἀντίος καὶ ἐπιβραχύ, 4.35). This evidence that the animal knows when and when not to use force is a sign that it can be trained and will submit to human authority:

ἡμερωθεὶς γε μὴν ἐξέτι νεαροῦ πρατότατός ἐστι καὶ ἐντυχεῖν ἡδύς, καὶ ἔστι φιλοπαίστης, καὶ πᾶν ὃ τι οὖν ὑπομένει πραόνως τῷ τροφεῖ χαριζόμενος. Ἄννων γοῦν λέοντα εἶχε σκευαγωγόν, καὶ Βερενίκη λέων πρῶος συνῆν, τῶν κομμωτῶν διαφέρων οὐδέν. ἐφαίδρυνε γοῦν τῇ γλώττῃ ἥσυχῃ τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτῆς, καὶ τὰς ῥυτίδας ἐλάεινε, καὶ ἦν ὁμοτράπεζος, πράως τε καὶ εὐτάκτως ἐσθίων καὶ ἀνθρωπικῶς. καὶ Ὀνόμαρχος δὲ ὁ Κατάνης τύραννος καὶ ὁ Κλεομένους υἱὸς συσσίτους εἶχον λέοντας. (*NA* 5.39, p. 119, line 24–p. 120, line 4.)

Having been tamed while still young, he is the most gentle and sweet to encounter, and he loves to play, and in everything that he endures temperately, he is pleasing to his master. Hanno at any rate had a lion as a baggage transport, and a tame lion was the companion of Berenike, in no way differently than her beauticians.¹⁹ It used to brighten her face gently with its tongue and smooth out her wrinkles, and it used to share her table, eating in a tamed, well-ordered, and human manner. And Onomarkhos, the tyrant of Katane, and the son of Kleomenes had lions as dining companions.

Aelian catalogues these figures from the past because of their penchant for harnessing the animal power of lions as part of the visual repertoire of their own kingly power. What better way to project the persona of a powerful ruler than to dine at table with lions or to be seen being caressed and licked by the king of beasts? But the attachment that these potentates felt toward their pet lions could have strong negative connotations. The Hanno whom Aelian mentions is probably the same man described by Pliny and Plutarch as having been banished from Carthage for daring to tame a lion, a sign that he was a dangerous threat to the freedom of his people.²⁰ Aelian's "son of Kleomenes" probably refers to Akrotatos, the son of Kleomenes II, king of Sparta, notorious for his indulgence in an extravagant, tyrannical

¹⁹ I adopt κομμωτῶν, which is the reading of Pierson and Hercher; GLR print κομμώντων.

²⁰ Plin. *Nat.* 8.55, Plu. *Mor.* 799e24 (*Praecepta gerendae reipublicae*); cf. Ael. *VH.* 14.30.

lifestyle.²¹ One is reminded by these stories of how lions and lion imagery figured in anecdotes about Alcibiades and the threat that his tyrannical nature posed to Athenian democracy. Playing on the tradition of the dangerous lion cub that Aeschylus famously described in the *Agamemnon*, Aristophanes has the same poet say about Alcibiades, “It’s not good to rear a lion cub in the city. If you do raise one to maturity, then cater to its ways.”²²

Aelian’s conception of the lion as mediating between the just rule of human authority and the violence of an untamed, monstrous nature conforms with the conversation at the end of Plato’s *Republic*, where Socrates describes the human soul as containing within it three creatures: a hybrid, many-headed beast, a lion, and a man. Socrates postulates that the just person will allow the man in his soul to govern the other two elements:

ὅθεν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ὁ ἐντὸς ἄνθρωπος ἔσται ἐγκρατέστατος, καὶ τοῦ πολυκεφάλου θρέμματος ἐπιμελήσεται ὥσπερ γεωργός, τὰ μὲν ἡμερὰ τρέφων καὶ τιθασεύων, τὰ δὲ ἄγρια ἀποκωλύων φύεσθαι, σύμμαχον ποιήσάμενος τὴν τοῦ λέοντος φύσιν, καὶ κοινῇ πάντων κηδόμενος, φίλα ποιήσάμενος ἀλλήλοις τε καὶ αὐτῷ . . . (Pl. *R.* 589a7–b5)

Whence the man inside will be most in control of the man, and he will take care of the many-headed creature, like a farmer, nurturing and taming what is mild, but preventing what is savage from growing, having made the lion’s nature his ally, and being concerned about everything in common, having made them friendly to each other and to himself.

In this formulation, the lion is analogous to the courageous or spirited part of the soul (*thumoeides*), through which the rational element (*logistikon*) is able to gain mastery over the appetitive part (*epithumêtikon*).²³ But the opposite situation, i.e. for the bestial elements to gain control over the human element, would result in tyranny. The figure of the lion, therefore, and how one relates to the lion are part of the symbolic vocabulary for expressing the precariousness of justice and how the failure to exert the proper control will give rise to injustice. Plato’s imagery accords with the lore of the Egyptians, for whom lions are an agent of divine justice: “lions, appearing as a dream to those to whom the god [Helios] is propitious, foretell some things, but those who have perjured they punish straightaway without delay, since the god breathes his just anger upon them” (καὶ γάρ τοι καὶ ὄναρ οἷσπερ οὖν ὁ θεός ἐστιν ἴλεως ἐπιστάντες προθεσπίζουσί τινα, καὶ τοὺς ἐπίορκον ὁμόσαντας οὐκ εἰς ἀναβολὰς ἀλλὰ ἤδη δικαιοῦσι,

²¹ D.S. 19.71.2–3.

²² A. A. 717–736; Ar. *Ra.* 1431–1432. For a summary, see Smith 2007: 213–217.

²³ Pl. *R.* 441d–442b.

τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ὀργὴν τὴν δικαίαν αὐτοῖς καταπνέοντος, *NA* 12.7, p. 284, lines 24–27). Further, when Aelian relates the legendary behavior of the people of Ambrakia, he may well have in mind Plato's imagery of the lion in the soul: "because a lioness tore apart their tyrant Phaülos, they revere the creature that was the cause of their freedom" (ἐπεὶ τὸν τύραννον αὐτῶν Φάυλον διεσπάσατο λέαινα, τιμῶσι τὸ ζῶον αἴτιον αὐτοῖς ἐλευθερίας γεγεννημένον, *NA* 12.37).

The relationship between human beings and lions and the role of the lion as the king of beasts is the topic of the important chapter that opens Book 3. The Maurousioi of Africa, says Aelian, walk the same paths with lions and drink water from the same source, but when the lions become hungry, this delicate symbiosis is threatened, for they leave behind their natural haunts and in their quest for food they dare to enter the very houses of the Maurousioi. The men forcefully remove them from the house, but women are gentler, speaking to them instead of employing force:

‘σύ δὲ οὐκ αἰδῆ λέων ὦν ὁ τῶν ζώων βασιλεὺς ἐπὶ τὴν ἐμὴν καλύβην ἰών, καὶ γυναικὸς δεόμενος ἵνα τραφῇς, καὶ δίκην ἀνθρώπου λελωβημένου τὸ σῶμα εἰς χεῖρας γυναικείας ἀποβλέπεις, ἵνα οἴκτω καὶ ἐλέω τύχῃς ὧν δέῃ; ὃν δέον εἰς ὀρείους ὁρμήσαι διατριβάς ἐπὶ τε ἐλάφους καὶ βουβαλίδας καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ὅσα λεόντων δεῖπνον ἔνδοξον. κυνιδίου δὲ ἀθλίου φύσει προσεικὼς ἀγαπᾷς παρατραφῆναι.’ (*NA* 3.1)

"Aren't you ashamed, being a lion, the king of the animals, to enter my hut and ask a woman to feed you, and like a wounded man to look at a woman's hands, so that you might get what you need through pity and mercy? You should set off to your mountain haunts to pursue hinds and antelopes and the other things that are a proper feast for lions. But similar in nature to a wretched little dog you want to be fed."

Aelian interprets the lion's ability to understand human language as the result of the Maurousioi and lions being "brought up and reared together" (συντρόφους καὶ ὁμοτρόφους): eating together and growing up together foster community between human and animal. Thus able to speak to the lion in terms that the lion will understand, the woman appeals directly to his kingly nature and hence to his understanding of justice, the proper order of things. Aelian states that the lion slinks away in shame, his eyes cast downward, "defeated by what is just" (ἡττηθεὶς τῶν δικαίων). The story reinforces the connection between kingship as the maintenance of balance between human and animal natures and the expression of that balance within the symbolic realm of the alimentary.²⁴ On a simple reading,

²⁴ Cf. Derrida 2009: 23.

the woman merely wants this dangerous animal out of her house. But the episode says much about the perceived boundary between human life and the life of the lion. The lion must, says the woman, live up to its proper nature, hunting down prey in the mountains. It must be daring and feral. To penetrate a human house and beg for food like a dog is to debase its own character. The kingly nature, by contrast, demands the proper bearing; the lion-king himself must be active, strong, and predatory.

Androkles and the lion

Aelian's rewriting of the story of Androkles and the lion brings this discursive background of the lion's association with the spirited/thumic aspect of kingship into direct contact with Roman imperial power. The famous story of the friendship between a lion and a condemned Roman slave culminates with a spectacular reversal of expectations in the Roman arena, in a moment that is potentially disruptive to the whole of the Roman political order. Variations of this story were popular and circulating in antiquity,²⁵ though this particular story was first told in Greek by the Alexandrian writer Apion (*fl. c.* 30 CE) in his book the *Aiguptiaka*, a collection of Egyptian curiosities. Apion's Greek account no longer exists, but Aulus Gellius translated the story into Latin for his miscellaneous collection, the *Noctes Atticae* (5.14). A comparison of Aelian's retelling with Gellius' Latin version reveals that in his retelling Aelian sought to streamline the narrative and to leave unresolved the challenge posed to imperial power at the conclusion of the story. In Aelian's version of the story, the question of power and kingly authority comes to the fore.

To begin, the narrative structures of both accounts are markedly different. Gellius' chronologically alinear account, preserving Apion's first-person voice in direct discourse, begins with the spectacle of a lavish "hunt" in the Roman arena; the peculiar behavior of the lion that will not attack the condemned slave of a man of consular rank leads to the slave's explanation before the emperor that once upon a time he had removed a thorn from the lion's paw and become friends with the lion. At this point, Gellius allows Androclus (Gellius' Latinized version of the name) to speak

²⁵ See Plin. *Nat.* 8.56–58 and the textually corrupt ending of Aelian *NA* 7.44. Marx 1889: 55–63 argues that the accounts of both Gellius and Aelian attest to the widely popular folk tale of the Grateful Beast. The story was the subject of visual art as well. Several small gems from the second and third centuries CE depict Eros removing a thorn from the paw of a lion. Bonner 1945: 441–444 concludes that the images represent the overlapping of the folk tale with the motif of the "sports of love" (cf. Luc. *DDeor.* 12.2) and with religious imagery from Egypt. See more recently Hellmann 2008: 192–199.

for himself in an extended first-person account in direct discourse. At the conclusion of Androclus' speech, Gellius explains that the decision was turned over to the people: Androclus was set free and the lion was given to him by popular vote. Gellius concludes by reverting once more to Apion's first-person account that he himself had seen Androclus leading the lion by a slender leash about the city's taverns, both celebrated by the people, the one for having played host to a man, the other for having healed a lion.

Aelian's version, by contrast, is told entirely by an "omniscient" primary narrator (to whom I refer as "Aelian" for the sake of convenience) and maintains a strict chronological linearity. This more straightforward narrative strategy may at first seem like the mark of a less sophisticated writer, but the narrative aims of each author should be considered. Gellius' version, focalized through the point of view of an astonished narrator who saw the events in the arena at first hand, is meant to evoke a similar sense of wonder in the reader. Delaying the explanation of the prior relationship between Androclus and the lion suspends the reader's wonder for as long as possible. Aelian's stated intention, on the other hand, both at the beginning and at the end of the narrative, is to illustrate that animals too possess the faculty of memory (Μνήμην δὲ παρακολουθεῖν καὶ τοῖς ζώοις, *NA* 7.44, p. 188, line 16; ἴδιον δὲ τῶν ζώων καὶ ἡ μνήμη, p. 189, lines 28–29). Memory, of course, presupposes an ordering of events in time, and the linear chronology of Aelian's narrative is mimetic of the lion's own ability to understand the temporal sequence of its life.

Aelian's choice to narrate the entire story himself also accounts for an intriguing suppression of a narrative detail found in Gellius' version. There, when interrogated by the emperor in the arena, Androclus explains that, after he had gone to Africa with the household of his master, the provincial governor, "I myself was compelled to flee because of the unfair beatings I received from him there every day" (*ego ibi iniquis eius et cotidianis uerberibus ad fugam sum coactus*, Gel. 5.14.17). To hear Androclus himself tell it, life with the senator, a cruel despot, was unbearable. Aelian's account, by contrast, is startling: "A man named Androkles, a household slave thanks to fortune, because he had committed some offense – what it was exactly and how great it was, I cannot say – ran away from his master, a member of the Roman senate" (τὸν δεσπότην ὄντα τῶν ἐκ τῆς Ῥωμαίων βουλῆς ἀπέδρα Ἀνδροκλῆς ὄνομα, οἰκέτης τὴν τύχην, ὃ τι κακουργήσας καὶ ἡλικὸν οὐκ οἶδα εἰπεῖν, *NA* 7.44, p. 188, lines 19–21). In Aelian's account, not only is the slave not allowed to speak for himself, but the prerogative of the Roman senator is unquestioned, as Aelian suppresses the possibility that the slave was a victim of the senator's unjust cruelty. The stated

presupposition, in fact, is quite the opposite: the slave ran away because he must have committed some offense against his master! But the discursive preservation of the hierarchical status quo at the beginning of Aelian's narrative makes the climactic outburst of the *dêmos*, calling for the liberation of the slave and the lion, all the more potentially revolutionary. Even the grammar and syntax of Aelian's artful sentence, quoted above, reflect the narrative's problematization of the political order: though Androkles is the grammatical subject of the sentence, the Roman master is granted the privileged first position in the sentence (impossible to convey in English translation). The oblique case of τὸν δεσπότην, however, hints at the possible occlusion of the master's power implied at the end of the narrative:

καὶ ὁ διδοὺς τὰς θέας καλεῖ τὸν Ἀνδροκλέα, καὶ τὸ πᾶν μανθάνει. καὶ θροῦς εἰς τὸ πλῆθος διαρρεῖ, καὶ τὸ σαφὲς ὁ δῆμος μαθόντες ἐλευθέρους ἐκβοῶσιν ἀφεῖσθαι καὶ τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ τὸν λέοντα. ἴδιον δὴ τῶν ζώων καὶ ἡ μνήμη.
(*NA* 7.44, p. 189, lines 25–28)

And the one producing the shows summons Androkles and learns the whole thing. And the report spreads, and the people, learning the clear truth, shout out for them to be set free, both the man and the lion. Indeed memory too is something particular to animals.

Comparison with Gellius' translation of Apion is once again instructive. Gellius provides a satisfying conclusion to the climactic events that transpire in the arena: the emperor yields to the will of the people, releasing Androclus and the lion, who were later regularly seen together in the streets and taverns of the city and acclaimed by the Romans (Gel. 5.14.29–30). Aelian, however, concludes his narrative at the moment when the *dêmos* is clamoring for the freedom of the pair. There is no resolution, as Aelian transitions abruptly to a restatement of the theme with which he began the narrative, i.e. that animals too have memory. The abruptness of this transition highlights the suspense of that final moment with which Aelian leaves his readers. The story, which began with the action of a slave that Aelian depicted as a disobedient transgressor, ends with the dilemma of an emperor who must decide between upholding the slave-owning rights of a senator and bending to the will of a potentially unruly mob. Despite that he was using Apion's story as a model, Aelian may well have had in mind the anecdote recounted by his contemporary Cassius Dio about the time when the emperor Hadrian, in a similar situation, was confronted in the hippodrome by an angry mob shouting for the freedom of a charioteer. Hadrian's response was to send around the hippodrome placards bearing the statement, "It is not right for you either to ask me to free another

man's slave or to compel his master to do so" (οὐ προσήκει ὑμῖν οὔτε παρ' ἐμοῦ αἰτεῖν ἵνα ἀλλότριον δοῦλον ἐλευθερώσω, οὔτε τὸν δεσπότην αὐτοῦ βιάζεσθαι τοῦτο ποιῆσαι, D.C. 69.16.3). Unlike the emperor in Apion's story, Hadrian is able to keep the mob in check even though he denies their request. Both this episode and the story of Androkles and the lion resonated with the potentially influential political role that the *dêmos* could assume at public spectacles during Aelian's own lifetime.²⁶

But rather than satisfy a reader's desire for a happy ending such as that provided by Apion and Gellius, Aelian leaves the reader suspended in that moment of an emperor's crisis about how to defuse a potentially explosive challenge. Aelian offers a vivid account of the recognition between Androkles and the lion, and how the lion comes to the aid of his human friend and former guest,²⁷ protecting him from another attacking beast: when the lion that was supposed to eat Androkles instead fawns over him and treats him as a long-lost companion, Androkles is suspected of being a sorcerer, and "a leopard too was released against him. But as it was rushing at Androkles, the lion, defending the one who had once healed him and remembering the table that they shared, tears the leopard apart" (ἐφείθη οἱ καὶ πάρδαλις. ὁρμώσης δὲ αὐτῆς ἐπὶ τὸν Ἀνδροκλέα, ὁ λέων ἀμύνων τῷ ποτε ἰασαμένῳ, καὶ κοινῆς τραπέζης μεμνημένος διασπᾷ τὴν πάρδαλιν, *NA* 7.44, p. 189, lines 22–24). Everyone present is rightly astonished by this paradox, wherein the lion's memory subverts the everyday expectations of the arena. When they learn Androkles' story and shout for the freedom of both man and lion, the focus finally shifts to the impending decision of the emperor. The Platonic theorization of justice hovers in the background of the scene, as the Roman arena offers to the emperor a variation on Socrates' allegorical image of the tripartite soul: rational man abetted by the spirited lion to vanquish the devouring beast. Aelian's emperor must rise to the challenge implied by this imagistic echo from Plato's *Republic* and choose his course of action: will he be a tyrant or a just king?

The indeterminacy with which the narrative closes, centered around the question of imperial power, is echoed in Aelian's language. Whereas Gellius refers to the emperor as Caesar (*accersitumque a Caesare Androclum quaesitamque causam*, Gel. 5.14.15), Aelian refers to the emperor periphrastically as "the one producing the shows" (ὁ διδοὺς τὰς θεάς, *NA* 7.44,

²⁶ See Cameron 1976: 185–188. The Hadrianic anecdote, preserved also in the book *De sententiis*, compiled for the tenth-century emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, echoes down the long ages of the Roman Empire as shrewd advice for emperors on how to control an unruly mob clamoring for the freedom of a slave.

²⁷ For the story's interrogation of moral concepts and preconceptions, see Osborne 2007: 135–150.

p. 189, line 25). The choice might superficially be explained away as the attempt of a Hellenizing writer to avoid the barbarism of Latin titles (note too Aelian's periphrasis describing the Roman senator as one τῶν ἐκ τῆς Ῥωμαίων βουλῆς, p. 188, line 19). But within a narrative framed by the issue of Roman authority – that of masters over slaves, of emperors over the *dêmos* – Aelian's linguistic turn away from the very terms of that authority paradoxically brings that power once more to the fore.

A different lion

The lion's ambiguous association with Roman imperial power is established yet again in a narrative extracted from the *Libyka*, a collection of African lore by Juba II of Mauretania, the same writer to whom Aelian turned for his programmatic opening chapter on the birds of Diomedes (*NA* 1.1). This chapter on an African lion is worth quoting in its entirety because of its bearing on the related questions of kingship and power:

Ἀμύνεσθαι δὲ τὸν προαδικήσαντα ὁ λέων οἶδε, καὶ εἰ μὴ
παραχρῆμα αὐτῷ τιμωρήσai,

ἀλλὰ τε καὶ μετόπισθεν ἔχει κότον, ὄφρα τελέσῃ,
ἐν στήθεσιν ἐοῖσι.

καὶ τούτου μαρτύριον Ἰόβας ὁ Μαυρούσιος ὁ τοῦ παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις ὀμηρεύσαντος πατῆρ. ἤλαυνέ ποτε διὰ τῆς ἐρήμης ἐπὶ τινὰ ἔθνη τῶν ἀποστάντων, καὶ τις αὐτῷ τῶν παραθεόντων μειρακίσκος εὐγενῆς μὲν καὶ ὠραῖος ἤδη δὲ θηρατικός λέοντά πως παρὰ τὴν ὁδὸν ἐκφανέντα ἀκοντίῳ βάλλει, καὶ σκοποῦ μὲν ἔτρυχε καὶ ἔτρωσεν, οὐ μὴν ἀπέκτεινε. κατὰ σπουδὴν δὲ τῆς ἐλάσεως οὕσης, τὸ μὲν θηρίον ἀνεχώρησε, παρέδραμε δὲ καὶ ὁ τρώσας καὶ οἱ λοιποί. ἐνιαυτοῦ γε μὴν διελθόντος ὁλοκλήρου ὁ μὲν Ἰόβας κατορθώσας ἐφ' ἃ ἐστάλη, τὴν αὐτὴν ὑποστρέφων ἔρχεται κατὰ τὸν τόπον, ἔνθα ἔτυχεν ὁ λέων τρωθεῖς. καὶ ὄντος πλήθους παμπόλλου πρόσεισι τὸ θηρίον ἐκείνο, καὶ τῶν μὲν ἄλλων ἀπέχεται, συλλαμβάνει δὲ τὸν τρώσαντα πρὸ ἐνιαυτοῦ, καὶ τὸν θυμόν, ὅνπερ οὖν παρὰ τὸν χρόνον τὸν προειρημένον ἐφύλαττεν, ἀθρόον ἐκχεῖ καὶ διασπᾷ τὸ μειράκιον γνωρίσας. ἐτιμώρησε δὲ οὐδεὶς, φοβηθέντες ὀργὴν λέοντος ἰσχυράν καὶ δεινῶς ἐκπληκτικὴν· ἄλλως τε καὶ ἡ πορεία ἤπειγεν. (*NA* 7.20)

And the lion knows how to defend itself against one who has committed an injustice against it first, even if it should not punish him right away, “but it keeps its anger in its heart for a later time until it might bring it to completion.” And Juba of Mauretania, the father of the one who was a hostage among the Romans, is evidence of this. He was marching once through the desert toward some nations of those who had revolted, and one of those marching alongside him, a noble, handsome young man and one already skilled in the hunt, throws his javelin at a lion that appeared,

I suppose, by the road, and he hit his mark and inflicted a wound, but he did not kill it. And since the march was in haste, the beast withdrew, and the one who wounded it ran by with the rest. When a full year had passed, Juba, having succeeded in what he set out to do, upon his return journey along the same road he comes to the place where the lion happened to have been wounded. And in the midst of the great throng, that beast attacks, and it abstains from the others, but seizes the one who had wounded him the year before, and the anger that it was preserving for the aforementioned length of time it pours out all at once and tears apart the young man when it recognizes him. And no one punished it, fearing the lion's anger, which was powerful and terribly frightening. And anyway, their journey was pressing.

Though Aelian states clearly at the beginning of the chapter that his moralizing theme is the lion's ability to bear a grudge, he embeds within that statement a quotation from Homer's *Iliad* that emphasizes also the political context of the story. The verses (*Il.* 1.82–83) evoke the scene of Kalkhas' reluctance to speak out in the Achaean assembly for fear of reprisal from Agamemnon. Further examination of Kalkhas' speech makes the political point clearly: "for a king is mightier when he becomes angry at a man of lesser rank" (κρείσσων γὰρ βασιλεὺς ὅτε χώσεται ἀνδρὶ χέρηϊ, *Il.* 1.80). The allusion suggests that there is another theme to this story, a theme that, while not stated as explicitly as the moralizing theme of the lion's anger, is nevertheless vividly brought out from beginning to end. The Homeric allusion reminds us that dealing with a king can be dangerous, requiring tact, subtlety, and a degree of circumlocution. The reader is already motivated, therefore, to wonder what Aelian is up to by asserting that his story is about one thing while providing a sophisticated literary allusion that suggests that there is something else at issue. It seems, in other words, that Aelian himself, like Kalkhas, is reluctant to state his theme outright within a Severan context and has instead camouflaged this narrative about kingly authority and imperial power as a merely curious anecdote about a lion.

It is significant, too, that Aelian preserves the frame within which Juba originally narrated the episode, as he carefully informs us that the Juba in the story, that is, Juba I, is "the father of the one who was a hostage among the Romans" (ὁ τοῦ παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις ὀμηρεύσαντος πατήρ, *NA* 7.20). His son, Juba II and Aelian's literary source for this chapter, was raised at the court of the emperor Augustus and received the very best education that an elite Roman could receive.²⁸ It was also thanks to Augustus that the young Juba, a Numidian, was placed on the throne of neighboring Mauritania in 25 BCE. Juba's literary and political identities were therefore

²⁸ Roller 2003: 65–73.

shaped by Rome. But the story of how the young African prince ends up at the court of Rome's first emperor is not a happy one. Juba's father had aligned himself with Pompey during the civil war with Julius Caesar, but after Pompey's death, and failing to stem Caesar's advances in Africa, Juba committed suicide in 48 BCE alongside Marcus Petreius, one of Scipio's lieutenants. Caesar therefore made Juba's kingdom tributary to Rome, and he brought Juba's son to Rome itself to be paraded in triumph as a symbol of his African victory.²⁹ What we have, therefore, in Aelian's chapter on the avenging African lion, is a son's literary reminiscence of the father whom he never knew and of a time before the rupture in his nation's history caused by Rome's civil wars.

The political background is reinforced by the fact that the story transpires during a military campaign when Juba "was marching once through the desert toward some nations of those who had revolted" (ἤλυνέ ποτε διὰ τῆς ἐρήμης ἐπὶ τινὰ ἔθνη τῶν ἀποστάντων, *NA* 7.20). The narrative then concludes a year later, when Juba "succeeded in what he set out to do" (κατορθώσας ἐφ' ᾧ ἐστάλη), i.e. to quash a rebellion. The episode of the lion's wounding and eventual vengeance are the results of the expression of Juba's own imperial power over neighboring nations. The world of animals and the world of men are thus intertwined in a series of imperial transformations, as first the rebels of Aelian's nameless African nations are reincorporated within the Numidian kingdom, and then Numidia itself is absorbed by Rome.

Against this background is the ambivalent power of the lion itself, which, as we have seen, may be either advantageous or dangerous. This episode is in stark contrast to the tale of Androkles and the lion, discussed above, a tale of communion between man and animal in which the moment of recognition results in a scene that is so extraordinary in its appeal to human emotion that it subverts the expectations of the Roman arena and potentially also the Roman political order. The story of this African lion, however, while also about a lion's capacity for memory over a long period of time, climaxes not with mutual affection between man and beast, but with the animal's violent retaliation against a man. The parallelism between the two scenes is strengthened by Aelian's use of the same verbs to describe the recognition between man and lion (γνωρίσας, 7.20, p. 176, line 3; ἐγνώρισε, p. 189, lines 18 and 20) as well as each lion's attack, as one tears apart (διασπᾶ) the man who wounded it and the other tears apart (διασπᾶ) the leopard attacking his human friend in the arena. Furthermore, each

²⁹ App. *BC* 2.101.

lion's violent attack is described alternatively as "defending the one who once healed it" (ἀμύνων τῷ ποτε ἰασαμένῳ, *NA* 7.44, p. 189, lines 23–24) and, by contrast, "defending itself against one who has committed an injustice against it first" (Ἀμύνεσθαι δὲ τὸν προαδικήσαντα, 7.20).

What accounts for the divergent endings is, however, not the different characters of the lions, but the different behavior of the human agent in each story. Androkles, though a slave because of the vagaries of fortune, nevertheless becomes the lion's healer and intimate companion, sharing meals and shelter. The protagonist of this story, however, could not be more different: he is young, noble, and good-looking, a candidate for romance perhaps, and – this is especially interesting – he is a man skilled in the hunt (θηρατικός). Whereas Androkles played the role of healer, this anonymous Numidian soldier inflicts a wound for the sake of sport. It would have been better for the young man if the throw of his javelin had been fatal, for by merely wounding the lion he arouses the lion's lasting anger and justly pays for his flippant action with his life: it is worth noting that at the beginning of the chapter Aelian implies that the lion's eventual retaliation is a form of justice, as the young man is described proleptically as someone "committing an injustice first" (τὸν προαδικήσαντα). Taken together, therefore, the story of Androkles and the lion and this tale of a lion's just revenge speak to the recurring theme of man's ethical relationship to power. Androkles' humane action secures for him a powerful defender, while the aggressive behavior of the Numidian soldier marks him as a prey of "the lion's anger, which was powerful and terribly frightening" (ὀργὴν λέοντος ἰσχυρὰν καὶ δεινῶς ἐκπληκτικὴν).

Roller notes that "Juba I had a close association with the lion and placed it on his coins, and by the Augustan period they had come to be proverbially associated with the world of Numidian and Mauretanian royalty."³⁰ The tradition of issuing coins with the image of the lion was continued by Juba II as well as by his son Ptolemaios.³¹ Ptolemaios' own royal pretensions antagonized the emperor Gaius, who had Ptolemaios murdered, resulting in Mauretania's failed revolt against Rome and eventual bifurcation by the emperor Claudius.³² Septimius Severus, however, revived the iconography of the African kings after he came to power in 193 CE: the lion appears on numerous coins issued during his reign commemorating the emperor's African origins. Another series of coins depict the lion as an attribute of the Dea Caelestis, the Goddess of Heaven, originally a Punic deity that

³⁰ Roller 2003: 203. For lion imagery on the coins of Juba I, see Mazard 1955: 93 (#89). For the association of lions with the kingdom of Mauretania, see Hor. *Carm.* 1.22.15–16.

³¹ Mazard 1955: 270 (#140–143) and 498–502 (#408–413). ³² Tac. *Ann.* 4.23–26; D.C. 59.25, 60.9.

was Romanized after the destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE. These coins were struck to commemorate some imperial favor (*indulgentia*) granted to the North African city by the Augusti, meaning Severus and his sons.³³

Lions were also famously part of the visual repertoire of the emperor Caracalla. A number of coins struck during his reign depict a radiate lion clutching a thunderbolt in its jaws; in this instance, Caracalla was drawing upon the animal's celestial associations with the sun god. It has been suggested that this celestial lion imagery was characteristic of the Emesene cult of Elagabal, but Aelian's chapters reveal that the lion was a solar symbol also in the religious iconography of Egypt, and so perhaps doubly attractive to Caracalla (see above).³⁴ But the lion was not only a heavenly creature for the emperor. Cassius Dio reports that Caracalla was thrilled when, while on campaign against the Parthians, a lion ran down from the mountains and fought alongside him. He also had a personal bodyguard of Scythians and Germans, whom he called "lions." In his retelling of the story of Androkles and the lion, Aelian may even have been motivated by an episode in 217 CE concerning the Egyptian Serapio, who was thrown to a lion for having confronted Caracalla with the prophecy of the emperor's impending death. But, according to Cassius Dio, when he was facing the beast, Serapio only had to extend his hand and the lion refused to touch him, at which point Serapio was slain by Caracalla's guards. Finally, there is the notice that Caracalla, like the Hellenistic rulers catalogued by Aelian at *NA* 5.39, used to surround himself with lions at all times, one of which was a special pet called Akinakes (the word for a Persian short sword) that was his companion both at table and in bed (ὁμοτράπεζον ὁμόκλινόν τε). It was a bad omen when, after having been disturbed by a dream in which his father Septimius Severus appeared to him and warned him that he would avenge Caracalla's murder of Geta, his favorite lion Akinakes seized him and tore his clothes.³⁵ These stories recall the ambivalence communicated by the first two generations of Severan emperors with their use of the imagery of the African lion, positioning themselves alternatively as just defenders of the empire and as tyrannical agents of cruel, gratuitous violence. Though Aelian does not write about Severan kingship in explicit

³³ For the lion as an attribute of Africa on the coins of Septimius Severus, see *CREBM* 5.127 (#504), 129 (#517), 130 (#523), 214 (#309), 262 (#530), 263 (#531, 532); *RIC* 4.1.118 (#207), 123 (#253), 183–184 (#668, 676). As an attribute of Dea Caelestis, see *CREBM* 5.208–209 (#279–282), 218 (#333–338), 248, 332, 334 (#830), 341–342 (#844); *RIC* 116 (#193), 125 (#266–267), 194–195 (#759–760, 763, 766). See also Birley 1999: 112 and Baharal 1996. On the Dea Caelestis, see Levick 2007: 133.

³⁴ *CREBM* 5.ccvii, 458–459 (#149–151), 462 (#177–178), 465 (#196), 488–90 (#290), 492–493 (#303–305); *RIC* 252 (#273), 254 (#283), 256–257 (#296), 303–307 (#548, 552, 557, 564, 566, 571).

³⁵ D.C. 79.1.5, 4.4–5, 6.1, 7.1–3.

terms as an historian of contemporary events, he nevertheless expresses his interest in the ideology of Roman kingship through his manipulation of the discourse on lions, a quintessential element in the symbolic vocabulary of the Severan emperors.

Eagles

The tradition of eagles as symbols of Roman power needs little elaboration. The bird was from the earliest times associated with Jupiter, which paralleled the eagle's association with Zeus in Greek myth. In the Republican period, there is the famous story of Gaius Marius, who, when he was a boy, caught in his cloak an eagle's nest containing seven chicks, an omen which was believed to presage his future political and military supremacy.³⁶ Later, when he reformed the military at the end of the second century BCE, Marius eliminated the use of all other animals as decoration for the standards and thenceforth the eagle became the special symbol for the Roman legions, whether in camp or marching into battle.³⁷ So successful was the Marian innovation that by the time of Cicero's consulship (63 BCE), the traitor Lucius Catilina appropriated the eagle symbol as a means of legitimizing his attempt to seize Rome.³⁸ The eagle also assisted the transition from the Republic to the Imperial period, as it became an effective symbol for communicating Augustus' role as civic benefactor: in a series of images beginning in 27 BCE, the eagle is seen bestowing the *corona civica*, a crown of oak leaves that was traditionally a military honor awarded to soldiers who had rescued a fellow soldier in battle. In this new context, Augustus is figured as having rescued the Roman people from the certain destruction of civil war. But soon the image of Jupiter's eagle bearing the crown also came to connote monarchical authority.³⁹

In his many chapters on the eagle, Aelian foregrounds several interrelated themes: its association with kingship, its affection for human beings, and the anxiety surrounding genuine paternity.⁴⁰ The eagle receives its most positive depiction when its association with kingship and its affection for human beings intersect. In one chapter, for example, the only Classical Greek source on the ancient Mesopotamian king Gilgamesh, Aelian tells the story of how an eagle rescued the infant Gilgamesh when he was thrown from the top of a citadel because his grandfather was upset by an oracle

³⁶ Plu. *Mar.* 36.5–6. ³⁷ Plin. *Nat.* 10.16.

³⁸ Cic. *Catil.* 1.24, 2.13. ³⁹ Zanker 1988: 92–94.

⁴⁰ The eagle and kingship: *NA* 9.2, 9.10, 12.21, 13.1, 17.47; its affection for human beings: 2.40, 5.29, 6.29, 12.21, 17.47; the issue of paternity: 2.26, 2.43, 9.3.

proclaiming that the baby would usurp his position as king (*NA* 12.21). The eagle in the story is not just the superior guardian of the baby, but serves also as the instrument that secures for Gilgames his divinely authorized kingship. Furthermore, despite the eagle's generally predatory nature, Zeus' own eagle abstains from the flesh of living creatures, "even though it has heard nothing of Pythagoras of Samos" (Πυθαγόρου τοῦ Σαμίου διακούσας οὐδέν, 9.10). Once again, the purity of the Pythagorean lifestyle represents for Aelian the philosophical ideal of a divinely sanctioned kingship. Even if kingship is by its nature violent and predatory, Aelian suggests that there is also a more virtuous possibility, a heavenly, benevolent, transcendent kingship.

Equally fascinating for their relevance to the political milieu of the Severan period are the chapters in which Aelian discusses the tradition of the eagle's concern over the legitimacy of its brood:

βάσανος δέ οἱ τῶν νεοττῶν τῶν γνησίων ἐκείνη ἐστίν. ἀντίους τῇ αὐγῇ τοῦ ἡλίου ἴστησιν αὐτοὺς ἀργοὺς ἔτι καὶ ἀπτῆνας· καὶ ἐὰν μὲν σκαρδαμύξῃ τις τὴν ἀκμὴν τῆς ἀκτίνος δυσωπούμενος, ἐξεώσθῃ τῆς καλιᾶς, καὶ ἀπεκρίθῃ τῇσδε τῆς ἐστίας· ἐὰν δὲ ἀντιβλέψῃ καὶ μάλα ἀτρέπτως, ἀμείνων ἐστὶν ὑπονοίας καὶ τοῖς γνησίοις ἐγγέγραπται, ἐπεὶ αὐτῷ πῦρ τὸ οὐράνιον ἢ τοῦ γένους ὀδέκαστός τε καὶ ἄγραπτος ἀληθῶς ἐστὶν ἐγγραφή. (*NA* 2.26)

And the test of the young rightfully begotten to it is as follows. It places them opposite the beam of the sun while they are still slow and without wings. And if one blinks because it has trouble seeing due to the blazing of the ray, it is expelled from the nest and rejected from this hearth. But if it returns its glance and does not look away, it is above suspicion and is registered among the lawfully born, since for it the heavenly fire is truly both the impartial and unwritten registration of the species.

The notice would have resonated during the Severan period, when a family vaunting its relationship with an eastern sun god also claimed legitimate descent from the Antonine dynasty. Septimius Severus himself invented the story of his adoption by Marcus Aurelius in order to legitimize his seizure of power after the assassination of Pertinax. Severus' son Caracalla therefore took the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Severus himself even demanded the deification of his "brother" Commodus, and portraits of members of the Severan family were clearly modeled on Antonine portraits.⁴¹ This strategy of legitimization attracted criticism from senators, and Cassius Dio reports that, because Severus adopted himself into

⁴¹ Birley 1999: 117, 127, 136; Levick 2007: 43; Newby 2007: 222–233.

the family of Marcus Aurelius, one prominent wag named Auspex congratulated him “for having found a father.”⁴² Despite the precedence for adoption as an acceptable means of securing dynastic ties in Roman political life, Severus’ retroactive claim clearly rankled, and Aelian’s notice about the eagle’s test of its chicks’ legitimacy penetrates to the heart of the matter, playing on the very artificiality of adoption as a demonstration of kinship, a performance wholly unnecessary among these kings of birds. Severus had to be “registered” (ἐγγραφέντος, D.C. 77.9.4) into the family of Marcus, but Aelian playfully embellishes the eagle’s natural paternity test as a paradoxical “registration without writing” (ἀγραπτος ἀληθῶς ἐστὶν ἐγγραφή, *NA* 2.26). The problem of dynastic legitimacy persisted in the period of crisis and confusion after the assassination of Caracalla in 217 CE. The young Avitus, a grand-nephew of Julia Domna, presented a successful challenge to Macrinus’ usurpation of the throne precisely because either Julia Maesa (sister of Julia Domna) or other opportunists in Syria fabricated a story that Avitus was a naturally born son of Caracalla.⁴³ This Avitus, of course, came to be known as Elagabalus because he held the hereditary priesthood of the Emesene god Elagabal, with whom he would later self-identify. Aelian’s story of the eagle’s paternity test by means of the sun, the “fire of heaven” (πῦρ τὸ οὐράνιον) would certainly have evoked for contemporary readers the case of the young Syrian emperor who claimed legitimacy both by paternity and by the divine authority of the sun god.

Above all, however, Aelian is interested in the eagle’s predatory quality and the fear that this bird of prey inspires. When they hear the fluttering of its wings in the distance, the eagle’s intended victims all seek concealment from the open sky and the bird’s impending attack. Not only does it seek out prey of small or moderate size (snakes, for example, and hares and other birds), but it also is daring and skilled enough to take down young deer and even full-grown bulls. And like the lion, it pollutes its prey with its malodorous breath, thus repelling scavengers from approaching the remains of its victims.⁴⁴ There is, however, a series of animals that are successful either in eluding capture or resisting the eagle outright: the goose, the swan, the octopus, and the crow. It is worth ending this chapter on Aelian’s interest in kingship by dwelling on these creatures of resistance.

In a fascinating chapter about how one particular victim, the goose, attempts to survive against the eagle, Aelian offers associative links between

⁴² D.C. 77.9.4. ⁴³ Hdn. 5.3, D.C. 79.30.2–31.4.

⁴⁴ *NA* 2.26, 2.39, 2.42, 3.13, 4.27, 5.30, 5.33, 9.2, 9.10, 13.11, 15.1, 15.19.

the eagle's predatory quality and the alimentary prudence of the goose, as well as issues of kingship and Roman imperial power:

Οἱ δὲ χῆνες διαμείβοντες τὸν Ταῦρον τὸ ὄρος δεδοίκασι τοὺς ἀετούς, καὶ ἕκαστός γε αὐτῶν λίθον ἐνδακόντες, ἵνα μὴ κλάζωσιν, ὥσπερ οὖν ἐμβалόντες σφίσι στόμιον, διαπέτονται σιωπῶντες, καὶ τοὺς ἀετούς τὰ πολλὰ ταύτῃ διαλανθάνουσι. θερμότατος ἄρα ὦν καὶ διαπυρώτατος τὴν φύσιν ὁ χῆν φιλόλουτρός ἐστι καὶ νήξει χαίρει καὶ τροφαῖς μάλιστα ταῖς ὑγροτάταις καὶ πόαις καὶ θριδακίαις καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς, ὅσα αὐτοῖς ἐνδοθεν ψυχὸς ἐργάζεται· εἰ δὲ καὶ ἐξαινοῖτο ὑπὸ τοῦ λιμοῦ, δάφνης φύλλον οὐκ ἂν φάγοι, οὐδ' ἂν πászαιτο ῥοδοδάφνης οὔτε ἐκῶν οὔτε ἄκων· οἶδε γάρ ὅτι τεθνήσκειται τούτων τινὸς ἐμφαγών. ἄνθρωποι δὲ ὑπὸ σοφίας ἐπιβουλεύονται καὶ εἰς τροφὴν καὶ εἰς ὕπνον. μυρίοι γοῦν καὶ πίνοντές τι κακὸν κατέπιον, ὡς Ἀλέξανδρος, καὶ ἐσθίοντες, ὡς Κλαύδιος ὁ Ῥωμαῖος καὶ Βρεττανικὸς ὁ τούτου παῖς· καὶ κατακοιμηθέντες οὐκ ἐξανέστησαν χρήσει φαρμάκου, οἱ μὲν ἐκόντες τοῦτο σπάζαντες, οἱ δὲ ἐπιβουλευθέντες. (NA 5.29)

And geese, when crossing the Tauros mountain, fear eagles, and each of them, biting on a stone, so that they might not scream, just as if having inserted a bridle bit, they fly across in silence, and in this way often elude the eagles. Indeed being most hot and fiery by nature, the goose is fond of bathing and rejoices in swimming and especially in food that is most healthy, in grasses and lettuces and the rest, whatever makes them cool inside. But even if it should become parched with hunger, it would not eat the leaves of the laurel, nor would it taste the rose-laurel, either willingly or unwillingly. For it knows that it will die when it has eaten any one of these. But human beings are plotted against craftily, both when they eat and when they sleep. And numerous men even when drinking have drunk down something bad, as Alexander, and when eating, as Claudius the Roman and Britannicus his son. And having been laid to sleep, they did not revive because of the use of poison, some having taken the draught willingly, others having been plotted against.

Fear of the eagle inspires the crafty device of the geese: by weighing down the tongue with a stone, they impose silence upon themselves and thus do not let the eagle in the vicinity know of their presence. The first part of the passage begs to be read allegorically: keeping one's mouth closed is one prudent way of dealing with dangerous tyrants. The allegorical interpretation becomes more pointed when it is considered that Aelian refers to the goose as a creature that is "most hot and fiery by nature" (θερμότατος ἄρα ὦν καὶ διαπυρώτατος), a quality, already noted, that Aelian associates with himself as an intellectual in search of knowledge and wisdom. This whole passage, then, suggests the strained relationship between hot-headed intellectuals and figures of political authority. Just as

alimentary imagery was prominent in the discourse on justice and kingship in relation to bees and lions, so here too Aelian focuses on the goose's knowledge about what and what not to eat. Discussion of the goose's craftily self-imposed silence leads to a consideration of the grasses and lettuces that the goose eats to cool its fiery nature. But Aelian insists that, even if it were suffering from starvation, the goose will not eat either the poisonous laurel or the rose-laurel. There may be here some symbolic significance to the association of the laurel (*daphnê*) with the cult of Apollo and prophetic speech, but rather than dwell on the religious, Aelian instead shifts back to the political, with the sententious statement that human beings are often the victims of murderous plots by means of poisoning. The Roman examples that Aelian mentions here, Claudius and Britannicus, were two famous victims of the emperor Nero – his adoptive father and brother, respectively – that he or his mother Agrippina killed to secure his own tyrannical rule.⁴⁵ There seems to have been a renewed interest in the story during the Severan period.⁴⁶ I do not mean to suggest that Aelian was harboring fantasies of assassination or poisoning. On the contrary, his focus here is not on the evil character of paradigmatically tyrannical figures like Nero, but rather on the ability of those figures that are able to elude the violence and plotting of eagles and tyrants alike.

Unlike the goose, though, the swan, the octopus, and the crow are more daring in their willingness to confront the eagle's violent attack. The swan, for Aelian a symbol of song, poetry, and the power of the Muses and Apollo, receives special treatment in the *NA*,⁴⁷ and in Book 5, Aelian cites Aristotle as his authority that there are bonds of peace (εἰρηναῖα) and a truce (ἔνσπονδα) between swans and all other birds.⁴⁸ The eagle is the only bird to transgress against this unwritten law that protects the swan. The eagle, however, "never wins, but is always defeated not only by the strength of the swan that is fighting him, but also by the justice of the one defending himself" (οὐδεπώποτε ἔκράτησεν, ἡττήθη δὲ αἰεὶ μὴ μόνον σὺν τῇ ῥώμῃ τοῦ κύκνου μαχομένου, ἀλλὰ καὶ σὺν τῇ δίκῃ ἀμυνομένου, *NA* 5.34, p. 117, lines 13–15). If the swan, even when appropriated from the more scientific zoology of Aristotle, is a figure for the humanistic qualities of literature, then this notice reflects a mentality that pits the literary artist against the injustice and violence of the tyrannical ruler, and in this mentality, the literary artist optimistically gets the upper hand every time. Furthermore, the swan is justified in his reciprocal use of violence because he is a defender

⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 12.64–69, 13.15–17; Suet. *Cl.* 43–45, *Nero* 33; D.C. 60.34, 61.7.

⁴⁶ Philostr. *VA* 5.27.1, 29.2, 32.2. ⁴⁷ *NA* 2.32, 5.34, 6.19, 10.36, 11.1, 11.10, 14.13, 17.23.

⁴⁸ Cf. Arist. *HA* 610a1; 615b1; fr. 270.15 Gig.

on the side of right. The point is repeated with much the same language again in the final book of the *NA*: “and [swans] are also brave when it comes to strength, and they take courage in it, not, however, so that they initiate injustice, but so that they defend themselves against the initiator. Easily therefore they get the better even of eagles, whenever those dare to attack them” (εἰσι δὲ καὶ πρὸς ῥώμην ἄλκιμοι, καὶ θαρροῦσιν αὐτῇ, οὐ μὴν ὥστε ἄρχειν ἀδίκων ἀλλ’ ἀμύνεσθαι τὸν ἄρξαντα. ῥαδίως οὖν καὶ τῶν ἀετῶν περιγίνονται, ὅταν ἐκεῖνοι τολμήσωσιν ἐπιθέσθαι αὐτοῖς, *NA* 17.24). It is not by accident that Aelian repeats himself; he is fully aware that this notice of the swan’s ability to stand up to the eagle in Book 17 hearkens back to the earlier chapter in Book 5: “and I spoke earlier about the manner of their battle” (καὶ εἶπον ἀνωτέρω τῆς μάχης τὸν τρόπον, *NA* 17.24). The relationship between the swan and the eagle sticks with Aelian as the composer of an animal miscellany that clearly has a political dimension, and it is a relationship that he emphatically wants the reader to remember.

The octopus, too, turns out to be a surprisingly able opponent of the overly daring eagle, and also like the swan, the octopus is not the aggressor, but the defender against this king of birds. Aelian’s chapter on the battle of the octopus and the eagle is richly textured with classical allusions, making it clear that his interests are not strictly zoological, but also political. The entire passage is worth considering:

Πολύποδος εἰς οὓς ἔμὸν καὶ ἐκεῖνο ἦκεν. ἦν πέτρα προήκουσα μέν, οὐ μὴν ἄγαν ὑψηλή. οὐκοῦν πολύπους ποτὲ ἀνερπύσας εἶτα ἠπλωσε τὰς πλεκτάνας, καὶ μάλα γε ἀσμένως ὑπεθάλπετο (καὶ γὰρ οὖν καὶ χειμέρια ἐδόκει πῶς), οὐ μὴν ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὴν χροάν τῆς πέτρας ἐκτρέψας ἦδη ἦν. πεφύκασι δὲ ἄρα δρᾶν τοῦτο οἱ πολύποδες τὰς εἰς ἑαυτοὺς ἐπιβουλάς φυλαττόμενοι καὶ μέντοι καὶ αὐτοὶ τοὺς ἰχθυὺς ἔλλοχῶντες. ἰδὼν οὖν ὁξὺ μέν, ἑαυτῷ δὲ οὐκ ἀγαθὸν τὸ θήραμα ἀετός, ὥσπερ οὖν ὀρμῆς τε ἅμα καὶ πτερῶν εἶχεν ἐμπηδᾷ τῷ πολύποδι, καὶ μέντοι καὶ δεῖπνον ἕξειν ἔτοιμον ἑαυτῷ τε καὶ τοῖς παισὶ τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ κατέγραφεν. πλόκαμοι δὲ ἄρα ἰχθύος ἐκείνου περιβάλλουσι τῷ ἀετῷ σφᾶς αὐτοῦς, καὶ ἀπρίξ ἐχόμενοι εἶτα ἔλκουσι κάτω τὸν ἔχθιστον, καὶ χανὼν λύκος ὡς ἂν εἴποις εἶτα μέντοι νεκρὸς ἐπενήχeto τῇ θαλάττῃ ὁ ἀετός ὑπὲρ τοῦ δεῖπνου. μυρία μὲν δὴ τοιαῦτα πάσχουσιν ὄρνιθες, πλείω δὲ ἄνθρωποι· ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἀδομένοις ὑφ’ Ἡροδότου Μασσαγέταις ὁ Καμβύσου Κύρος ὁ ἕτερος καὶ μέντοι καὶ Πολυκράτης εἰς Ὀροῖτου σπεύσας ὡς τὸν χρυσὸν ἀρπασόμενος καὶ ἄλλος

τεύχων ὡς ἐτέρω τις ἑῷ κακὸν ἦπατι τεύχει.

καὶ ταῦτα μὲν οὐκ οἶδε τὰ ἄλογα, ἄνθρωποι δὲ εἰδότες οὐ φυλάττονται. καὶ τί δεῖ γλώττης καὶ λόγων καὶ διδασκάλων καὶ πληγῶν, ὧς Κύρε

καὶ Πολύκρατες; τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἔῶ· τί γάρ μοι κωφοῖς καὶ ἀνοήτοις συμβουλεύειν τὰ λυσιτελέστατα; (*NA* 7.11)

The following too about the octopus has reached my ear. There was a rock jutting out, not very high. Accordingly, an octopus once creeping up then spread out its tentacles, and it very much welcomed the warmth (for it seemed to be wintry), but had not yet turned itself into the color of the rock. And indeed octopuses do this by nature, both when they defend themselves against attacks and even when they themselves lie in ambush against fish. Then, seeing keenly, though it was not a good prey for himself, an eagle, rushing as fast as he can with his wings, leaps upon the octopus. And indeed he reckoned that he would have a meal both for himself and for his children. But the arms of that fish wrap themselves around the eagle, and holding on tightly they then drag their enemy down, and the gaping wolf, as you might say, the eagle was floating dead upon the surface of the sea because of its meal. Countless such things do birds suffer, but more so do humans. And among the Massagetai celebrated by Herodotus, Cyrus the Second, the son of Kambuses and indeed even Polukrates who hastened to the house of Oroites intending to steal the gold and another man “fashioning harm for another, fashions harm for his own heart.” And irrational creatures do not know these things, but human beings who do know them do not guard against them. And what need is there of the tongue and words and teachers and beatings, o Cyrus and Polukrates? And I pass over the others. For why should I offer the most profitable counsel to the deaf and to fools?

In the opening image of the octopus unfurling its tentacles as it suns itself upon the rock, Aelian uses one of his favorite verbs (*haploun*), more typically attributed to birds as they unfurl their wings and seen for the first time in the *NA* in the opening chapter on the birds of Diomedes.⁴⁹ Just as the octopus is able to camouflage itself upon its rocky setting, so too, as Aelian’s language suggests, can it adapt itself to the behaviors and movements of other animals. Aelian emphasizes the octopus’ stealthy adaptability also in the important opening chapter of the *Varia historia*, which Domitilla Campanile has even suggested serves as a figure for Aelian’s literary aesthetic and as a preface for the work as a whole (see [Chapter 10](#)).⁵⁰ This passage on the octopus that vanquishes the attacking eagle therefore may be read as a statement about the political dynamic latent in Aelian’s particular brand of literary activity.

The literary allusions reinforce this reading. At first the eagle is likened to another animal, the wolf of fable whose gaping mouth was a sign of his uncontrollable hunger and disappointed expectations.⁵¹ The parallel

⁴⁹ *NA* 1.1, 2.27, 4.38, 8.9, 12.25, 14.7.

⁵⁰ Campanile 2006: 429–430.

⁵¹ Babr.16; Eub. fr. 15.11 Kock.

exempla from Herodotus make the political point explicit, as the eagle is compared with the Persian king Cyrus the Great and with the tyrant Polukrates of Samos, both of whom met their gruesome ends because they could not keep their imperial desires and ambitions in check.⁵² Even Aelian's quotation of a favorite line from Callimachus,⁵³ that "someone fashioning harm for another, fashions harm for his own heart" (τεύχων ὡς ἐτέρῳ τις ἔῳ κακὸν ἥπασσι τεύχει, (Call. fr. 2.5 Pfeiffer), has its origins in the most ancient discourse on kingship in Greek literature: the verse is a reworking of a sententious statement by Hesiod in the *Works and Days*, in a passage where the poet warns unjust kings to straighten up, or else they will receive just punishment from Zeus.⁵⁴

However sure he is of the value of his political advice, cautioning kings to be wary of their excessive desires, Aelian is nevertheless pessimistic about the receptiveness of his target audience. In the conclusion of the passage, Aelian apostrophizes Cyrus the Great and Polukrates directly, though by implication – "I pass over the others," he says – he is speaking to all those who wield authority. Aelian's experience of imperial power has led him to the hopeless certainty that the appetitive element is bound to reign supreme over the rational element within the soul of kings, despite the prudent advice offered by philosophers and intellectuals: neither their words nor even their thrashings will steer kings toward virtue. It is, therefore, useless, Aelian says with resignation, to preach "to the deaf and to fools."

Lest Aelian be mistaken for exclusively harboring radical fantasies of resistance against his Roman sovereigns, his chapter on the crow offers a more sober depiction of the relationship between the literati and their emperors in the third century. He says that it is typical of crows to tease (ἐρσεχελεῖν, *NA* 15.22) eagles, but the eagles pay them little mind, flying at a far higher altitude. Aelian's language here becomes equally elevated, as he says that the eagles "cut the ether itself, which is more lofty, with swiftest wings" (τὸν αἰθέρα ὑψηλότερον ὄντα τοῖς ὠκίστοις τέμνουσιν αὐτὸν πτεροῖς). Aelian is emphatic that the eagles are not afraid of the crows that harass and caw at them from below, "for," he says, "how could anyone say this who knows well the strength of eagles?" (πῶς γὰρ ἂν τοῦτο εἴποι τις, τὴν τῶν αἰετῶν ἀλκὴν καλῶς ἐπιστάμενος;). Rather, the eagles allow the light talk of the crows below to go unchecked because of their own magnanimity (ἰδίᾳ τινὶ μεγαλονοίᾳ).

⁵² Hdt. 1.212–214, 3.120–125. ⁵³ Cf. *VH* 8.9 and fr. 22 Hercher.

⁵⁴ οἱ τ' αὐτῷ κακὰ τεύχει ἀνὴρ ἄλλῳ κακὰ τεύχων, Hes. *Op.* 265. On Callimachus' appropriation of the Hesiodic scene, see Nisetich 2001: 61–65, 235.

One way of reading this passage is as a reflection of the pessimistic role of the writer or intellectual within an Imperial setting. Aelian may well have envisioned himself and contemporary men of letters as merely being tolerated by the emperor, and he may have thought that the emperor would have heard their philosophical advice as the yammering of crows. But educated readers would also have recognized in Aelian's passage an allusion to Pindar's second Olympian ode: "Wise is the man who knows much by nature. But those who have learned, boisterous in their garrulity like a pair of crows let them cry in vain against the divine bird of Zeus" (σοφὸς ὁ πολλὰ εἰδὼς φυᾷ μαθόντες δὲ λάβροι | παγγλωσσίᾳ κόρακες ὡς ἄκραντα γαρύετον | Διὸς πρὸς ὄρνιθα θεῖον, *O.* 2.86–88 Bowra). Pindar contrasts the innate talent of the wise man with the acquired skill of lesser men, and the scholiasts indicate that the "pair of crows" is meant to represent Pindar's poetic rivals Bacchylides and Simonides, while "the divine bird of Zeus" is meant to represent Pindar himself. If Aelian embeds this notice about crows and eagles in his own text not just as a pessimistic bit of political theory but as a gibe against his literary rivals in Rome, then it is interesting that the Pindaric allusion assimilates Aelian himself to the eagle, the divine bird of Zeus traditionally associated with kingship. Aelian's restoration to eagles of their traditional kingly qualities in this chapter – they are strong creatures whose thoughts are as elevated as their station – is also an elevation of his own status as a superior literary talent.

Conclusion

Whereas contemporary writers like Philostratus and Cassius Dio incorporate into their works fictionalized scenes of philosophers or intellectuals speaking freely before their sovereigns and offering pointed advice about how best to govern, Aelian's treatment of the theme of kingship is more radically indirect. In his chapters on bees and the hive, Aelian offers a utopian view of social organization as well as of the idealized philosopher king, a benevolent ruler who loves his subjects and abstains from violence even when he has the natural power to use it. The bee is also important for Aelian because of its association with honey and honey's traditional metaphorical association with literature. In his Platonic conception of ideal kingship and social organization, Aelian restores to literature by means of his positive re-evaluation of the bee a politically significant role: literature – and especially a book like the *NA* – is not just a source of sweetness and pleasure, but a medium for conveying philosophical virtues.

The Platonic background on kingship also informs Aelian's chapters on lions, which serve mainly as figures of royal strength. But an ambivalence surrounding lions pervades these chapters. When properly harnessed, the power of the lion may bolster man's better endeavors, aiding it in its pursuit of the heavenly virtues of proper kingship. But Aelian also emphatically reminds his readers of the lion's carnal appetites and how difficult it can be to tame its fearsome nature. Thus the lion may also symbolize tyranny, a brutal strength that is more aligned with the monstrous appetite, and less with the rational element in the soul. This ambivalence, best illustrated in the story of Androkles and the lion and in a parallel story that Aelian retells from the pages of Juba's *Libyka*, would have held a political relevance for Aelian's readers, as both Septimius Severus and Caracalla used the imagery of lions to communicate the legitimacy of their rule and their African origins, but also, consciously or not, the more violent and tyrannical side of their authority.

Finally, the eagle had for centuries been a prominent symbol, first of Roman military power, and then under the principate a symbol of Roman imperial authority. At its most positive, the eagle is significant to Aelian for its traditional association with kingship, its fabled affection for human beings, its anxiety about the legitimacy of its brood, and its paternity test by means of exposure to the god Helios. This last theme, upon which Aelian especially focuses, would in Aelian's own lifetime have certainly evoked thoughts of Septimius Severus and Elagabalus, both of whom sought to legitimize their reigns by fabricating genealogies that placed them in a direct line of descent from Marcus Aurelius and the Antonine emperors.

But the eagle also stands out for Aelian as a bird of prey, one of the more troublesome aspects of its association with kingly power, given Aelian's conception of the ideal king as a creature of peace that abstains from violence. This is reinforced by the noteworthy remark that, despite the bird's predatory nature, Zeus' own eagle refrains from eating any living creature. The eagle's reputation for violence is complemented in the *NA* by several chapters on those creatures that are capable of withstanding its unforeseen attacks. The goose, the swan, the octopus, and the crow all offer varying forms of resistance to the king of birds, ranging from outright evasion, self-imposed silence, physical strength, and even a frank outspokenness. In the end, though, Aelian's remarks on the futility of trying to offer philosophical advice to kings lead to the pessimistic figuration of such outspokenness as the mere heckling of crows, noise that the eagles

of the world may simply ignore as they cut their superior course through the ether. But that superior course remains attractive to the philosophically ambitious man of letters, and we may glimpse him from time to time appropriating the symbolic vocabulary of kingly authority to vaunt his own literary talent.

After animals: the women of the Varia historia

The *Varia historia* and Severan culture

Aelian followed the *NA* with another miscellany. In this new work, Aelian turned away from animals and dealt more directly with human characters. Alcibiades, Alexander the Great, Aristotle, Diogenes, the Dionysii of Syracuse, Euripides, Plato, and Socrates (among many others) all make repeated appearances in anecdotes that are sometimes humorous, sometimes merely curious, and very often moralizing.¹ In its present form, the collection lacks a preface or epilogue such as those found in the *NA*. The first attestation of the work in antiquity is from the fifth century CE *Anthologion* by John of Stobi (Ioannes Stobaios), who refers to Aelian's text several times as ἡ σύμμικτος ἱστορία ("mixed history").² The tenth-century *Souda* lexicon, however, refers to the work once as ποικίλη ἀφήγησις ("varied narration")³ and three times as the ποικίλη ἱστορία ("varied history"),⁴ the same title given by the manuscripts of the text and as it is commonly known today.

Some of the passages that John of Stobi collected from Aelian's work are significantly different from the same passages that have been handed down in the manuscripts of the *Varied History* (*VH*). In some cases, the text as it appears in John's collection is a slightly abbreviated version of what appears in the manuscripts of the *VH*, while in other cases John's version is longer and a bit more elaborate.⁵ This suggests that the manuscripts represent an epitomized or abbreviated version of the text; it remains uncertain how much of the original text has been lost.⁶ Wilson has inferred from the work's "clearly unfinished state" that Aelian left the *VH* incomplete at the time of

¹ On the historical figures in the *VH*, see Prandi 2005: 81–110.

² Stob. 3.17.28, 3.21.6, 4.25.38, 4.32a.10, and 4.55.10.

³ *Souda* α 4140. ⁴ *Souda* δ 1478, κ 146, and φ 445.

⁵ Longer versions in Stobaeus: *VH* 3.3 (Stob. 4.44.63), 3.28 (Stob. 3.22.33), 7.5 (Stob. 3.29.60), 10.5 (Stob. 4.8.24), 14.3 (Stob. 3.13.67). Abbreviated versions in Stobaeus: *VH* 7.20 (Stob. 3.12.19), 8.15 (Stob. 3.21.6), 2.43 (Stob. 4.32a.10).

⁶ Wilson 1997: 13–14, Kindstrand 1998: 2969, Prandi 2005: 11–48.

his death.⁷ This remains speculative, though: the *apparently* unfinished state of the work may be the result of multiple processes of abbreviation, which may additionally account for the absence of a preface and/or epilogue. Two fragments by Aelian from the *Souda*, though lacking attribution to a specific work, echo sentiments from the preface and epilogue of the *NA* and may have been extracted from similar prefatory or concluding passages in the *VH*.⁸ I agree, though, that Aelian must have composed the *VH* in his later life, probably during the final years of Caracalla's reign, through the reign of Elagabalus, and into the reign of Alexander Severus. It is also possible that there was a period of overlap between the time when Aelian was finishing the *NA* and beginning the *VH*.

Even after completing the *NA*, Aelian was not quite finished with animals. The first fifteen chapters of the *VH* seem as if they are a continuation of the *NA*. At the beginning of this new miscellany, we read of octopuses, spiders, frogs, dogs, foxes, turtles, boars, lions, monkeys, goats, mice, ants, swans, eagles, and pigeons. Domitilla Campanile has even suggested that the first item in the collection could serve as a preface for the whole of the *VH*: writing about the hunting and eating habits of the octopus, Aelian figures that animal as a symbol of literary versatility and *poikilia*.⁹ Animals in all their variety still hold the writer's imagination.

But then suddenly the focus shifts from animals and the reader encounters Socrates, soberly awaiting death in prison. Apollodorus arrives bearing an expensive, finely woven tunic of wool and a similar such cloak, which he asks Socrates to wear when he drinks the hemlock so that his corpse might await burial "in becoming style" (σὺν τῷ κόσμῳ, *VH* 1.16) and "in a manner not at all undignified" (οὐ πᾶν τι ἄδόξως). Socrates is disappointed with Apollodorus' gesture, and turning to Crito, Simmias, and Phaedo, he wonders how Apollodorus could have such an opinion of him, "for if he thinks that the one who in a little while will be lying at his feet ready and for burial is me, then he evidently doesn't know me."

In this first chapter that is *not* about animals, Aelian nevertheless evokes again an anxiety found in his previous work. Conjuring this reminiscence of Socrates hearkens back to Aelian's own self-fashioning as a Socratic type in the preface and epilogue of the *NA*; here, too, though Socrates persists as a critical figure. Apollodorus' expensive, richly woven tunic and cloak are like the putatively luxurious literary aesthetic that Aelian felt he previously needed to defend. Just as Apollodorus, in his excessive care for

⁷ Wilson 1997: 6. ⁸ Frs. 26 and 27 Hercher; 29 and 30 Domingo-Forasté.

⁹ Campanile 2006: 429–430.

the appearance of his teacher's corpse, failed to truly know Socrates, so Aelian, in his indulgence in *poikilia*, fails to grasp true philosophy. For as much as Aelian fashions himself as a Socratic figure, the cultural memory of Socrates also paradoxically perpetuates the philosophically based criticism of Aelian's literary art.

But philosophy and morality are prominent throughout much of Aelian's new collection,¹⁰ and his decision to deal more directly with human behavior (and not exclusively by contrast with the behavior of animals) suggests renewed urgency. Stamm has argued that the urgent moralizing of the *VH* reflects Aelian's perception (shared by contemporaries like Cassius Dio and Herodian) that *luxuria* or its Greek equivalent *truphê* had reached its acme in Rome during the reign of Elagabalus. Furthermore, Aelian's emphasis on *philanthrôpia*, *euergesia*, and *sôphrosunê* may be said to celebrate the humanity, service, and moderation of Elagabalus' successor, Alexander Severus.¹¹ I think Stamm is right that the moralizing and philosophical orientation of the *VH* reflects contemporary cultural anxieties, though this was nothing new for Aelian, as he indicates in the preface and epilogue of the *NA* that that work arose out of his general discontent with Severan culture. The *NA* was composed during the reigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla; with Elagabalus, Aelian's moral discontent only intensified, to which his diatribe *Indictment of the Little Woman* bears witness.¹²

In the remaining sections of this chapter, the narratives about two different women – one a concubine, the other a virgin huntress – provide the basis for an exploration of the flexible boundaries of *truphê*, the prime target for moral criticism throughout the *VH*. Male effeminacy of the kind that motivated Aelian to call Elagabalus a *gunnis* is just one manifestation of *truphê*. More generally, *truphê* is "luxurious living" of any kind and is perceived as a sign that the subject is incapable of resisting the temptations of physical pleasure derived from any of the five senses.¹³ The targets for criticism are varied and numerous: "many women of that time" indulged in extravagant clothing and jewelry, nor are the women of Attica exempt, as Aelian even alludes to a then well-known catalogue of implements and ornaments used by Athenian women from a now lost play by Aristophanes (1.18, cf. Ar. fr. 332 K.–A.). Aelian also notes that among

¹⁰ Stamm 2003: 236–272. ¹¹ *Ibid.* 274–279.

¹² On connections between the diatribe against Elagabalus and depictions of tyranny in the *VH*, see Prandi 2005: 71–80.

¹³ For a history of the criticism of *truphê* in Greek culture from the Archaic period, see Bernhardt 2003; Gorman and Gorman 2007 offer a reassessment of the evidence in Athenaeus to show that the theory of moral decline in the case of Sybaris is not Hellenistic but later.

his favorite Athenians once upon a time even the men used to wear golden grasshoppers in their hair and always had their slaves on hand to supply a chair for sitting down (4.22). Whole societies could be corrupted by *truphê*: Sybaris¹⁴ and Persia are only the most famous examples, but Aelian also mentions Colophon, Corinth, and Cyrene (1.19, 5.1, 12.30). Proof of *truphê* among the Greeks generally is their practice of mixing perfume into their wine (12.31). A number of men from the past are singled out for their self-indulgent lifestyles: Straton of Sidon (7.2), Nikokles of Cyprus (7.2), Poliarkhos the Athenian (8.4), Polukrates of Samos (9.4), Demetrios of Phalerum (9.9), Dionysius of Heraklea (9.13), Smindurides of Sybaris (9.24, 12.24), Nauklides of Sparta (14.7), and Hanno of Carthage (14.30). Socrates too, the exemplar of self-control, is vulnerable to accusations of *truphê*: the philosopher Diogenes used to say that “even Socrates himself indulged in luxurious living (τροφιῆσαι), for he paid too much attention to his little house and his little couch and even sandals, which indeed Socrates used to wear sometimes” (4.11). The relationship between luxurious living and self-control connects *truphê* with the philosophical ideals of *sôphrosunê* and *enkrateia*. These were masculine ideals, hence the charge of effeminacy leveled at any man who failed to demonstrate appropriate moderation and self-control. The policing of *truphê* pervaded all kinds of social encounters, but at its most extreme it was institutionalized within Spartan culture. Aelian quotes a Spartan law requiring the ephors every ten days to examine the bodies of ephebes for masculine complexion and physical definition; their clothing, too, had to have the proper masculine style; and Spartan cooks were expected to prepare meat simply, while those practicing more elaborate culinary arts were banished (14.7).

Decent women were expected to live up to these masculine ideals by embodying *sôphrosunê* and *enkrateia* and by resisting *truphê* in their own way. The most prominent examples of such ideal women in Imperial Greek literature are the heroines of the Greek romances, those supposedly chaste young women, uncommonly devoted to the young men who will become their husbands, female models of Greek moderation who reject the corrupting influences of barbarian cultures. Recent interpretations of the romances, though, have focused on the complex moral ambiguities beneath the genre’s idealizing gloss. Few now would characterize the Greek romances as naïve love stories; on the contrary, the extant texts all bear artful testimony to that genre’s ability to represent moral complexity against a background of ideal models, to incorporate sub-narratives resistant to romantic ideology,

¹⁴ On Sybaris, see also fr. 87 Hercher, 90a–d Domingo-Forasté.

and even to challenge traditional Hellenism.¹⁵ The heroines of romance especially are complex, ambiguous individuals. Chariton's Kallirhoe is only the most famous example of a woman who manipulates chastity as a means of survival: by marrying two different men she becomes the only heroine in the surviving romances who does not remain chaste or even sexually faithful to one man. All of the heroines of the romances, though, to greater or lesser extents negotiate the boundaries of what is considered decent or appropriate behavior.¹⁶

Aelian turns to the subject of female *sôphrosunê* in the stories of Aspasia and Atalante, the two longest chapters of the *VH*. The figures of Aspasia and Atalante are fascinating in their own right, but Aelian's ethical portraits of these women must also be connected to the perceived relationship between *truphê* and the feminine. When *truphê* is identified in men, it is interpreted as effeminacy, for the feminine represented sensuousness and lack of self-control in Greek philosophical thought, as is well known.¹⁷ The narratives of Aspasia and Atalante therefore offer opportunities for narrative explorations of characters whose gender is meant to signify a problematic relationship to *sôphrosunê*. The category of "woman" poses a special philosophical challenge for Aelian's meditation on masculine ethics. In these two elaborate *logoi* at least, women are interesting to Aelian because, like animals, they are good to think with.¹⁸ Much feminist scholarship on classical literature, especially Athenian drama, has considered how women function as signs within the semiotic system of Greek thought.¹⁹ Aelian's *logoi* on Aspasia and Atalante also reveal the constructed, semiotic quality of these women: courtesan and virgin huntress play symbolic roles within a masculine economy of thought about pleasure and the body.²⁰ But I suggest additionally that Aelian's literary imagination does not pessimistically foreclose the possibility of female subjectivation. To recognize that "woman" is a sign is also to acknowledge that "woman" is not a natural category, but rather something produced by culture. The possibility then opens up that the semiotic system itself may be manipulated and new signs produced. Female subjectivation entails, however, the further possibility of

¹⁵ See among others Zeitlin 1990, Goldhill 1995, Morales 2004, Smith 2007, and Whitmarsh 2011.

¹⁶ Haynes 2003: 44–80.

¹⁷ For the evidence in Plato and Aristotle, see Spelman 1982: 111–119 and Foucault 1985: 84–86.

¹⁸ Cf. Lévi-Strauss 1963: 89, Detienne 1979: 53–54, and Loraux 1993: 9. On the value of animals for thinking about gender in Achilles Tatius, see Morales 1995.

¹⁹ See especially Gould 1980, Foley 1981 and 2002, Zeitlin 1985 and 1996, and Rabinowitz 1993. On the Greek novel, see Haynes 2003 and Morales 2004.

²⁰ See also Brulé 1989.

a disruption to the masculine order of things: not every female subject will be a collaborator within the dominant symbolic system.²¹

The erotic narratives about Aspasia and Atalante proceed like the Greek novels in part as illustrations of the prescriptive philosophical demands of *sôphrosunê* and the rejection of *truphê*; in this regard they illustrate and contribute to the social construction of “decent” women. They are, as Pierre Brulé has described them, reflections “au miroir masculin.”²² But Aelian’s narratives also in ways subtle and not so subtle reveal female protagonists who transcend the constraints of *sôphrosunê* as it has been imposed by traditional Greek culture. It is the goal of this chapter to show that in the two most elaborate narratives of the *VH*, Aelian showcases Atalante and Aspasia as powerfully subversive women who transform the moral framework by which their life and behavior are to be interpreted.

Aspasia of Phokaia

At the beginning of Book 12, Aelian tells the story of Aspasia of Phokaia, who is transformed from impoverished Greek virgin to influential concubine at the courts of two Persian brothers. This Aspasia (not to be confused with the more famous companion of Pericles) was a character from history with whom Aelian was familiar from the works of Xenophon, Plutarch, and possibly from Athenaeus, if not others.²³ Aelian’s narrative in three episodes is by far the longest extant account about this woman. Aspasia of Phokaia is unlike the *hetairai* who receive moral censure throughout the *VH*.²⁴ When writing about *hetairai*, Aelian typically reflects the sentiments of Socrates, who told Kallisto that she led all of the men devoted to her on a downward path (*VH* 13.32). There was, moreover, a long tradition of wicked women in the East who acquired power and influence over kings by means of their sexual charisma; one thinks especially of Homer’s Helen and the wife of Kandaules in Herodotus.²⁵ Aspasia, however, by remaining virtuous despite her radical cultural and social transformation, problematizes female virtue. She is more than just a model Greek woman – a *Mustergriechin*, as Bernhardt describes her.²⁶ The paradoxical nature of

²¹ This formulation is based largely on Butler 1999: 3–44, who builds on the work of de Beauvoir, Irigaray, Foucault, and Wittig.

²² Brulé 1989: 58.

²³ *X. An.* 1.10.2; *Plu. Art.* 26–28, *Per.* 24.11–12; and *Ath.* 13.37 (576d). See Neuhaus 1901, Puiggali 2004: 197–199, and Pervo 2005: 62–63.

²⁴ Cf. *VH* 4.1, 12; 7.2; 9.32; 10.2; 13.8–9, 32, and 33.

²⁵ See Pervo 2005: 62, with references and bibliography.

²⁶ Bernhardt 2003: 213.

her existence as sexual object *and* moral creature demands different ways of thinking about what it means to be a decent woman.²⁷

Aelian's narrative begins with an episode that establishes Aspasia's special relationship with the goddess Aphrodite. Aspasia of Phokaia was a girl raised in poverty by her father alone, since her mother died in childbirth, though this did not prevent her from being brought up with moderation and with self-control (σωφρόνως μέντοι καὶ ἐγκρατῶς, *VH* 12.1, p. 124, lines 4–5 Diltz). She was regularly visited by a dream that hinted at her future: she would live with a man who was fine and noble. But while she was still a child, a growth (φῦμα, line 8) appeared beneath her chin; it was ugly to look at and distressed both her and her father. To be treated by a physician was too costly, and Aspasia was grieved that she would have to live with a permanent disfigurement: “holding a mirror in her lap and looking at herself in it, she became very upset” (lines 13–15). But her grief was alleviated by the visitation of another dream. A dove appeared to her that transformed into a woman, who told her to bid farewell to physicians and their remedies: she should grind up the withered roses from the garlands dedicated to Aphrodite and sprinkle them as a powder upon the disfiguring growth. She did exactly as the dream prescribed, the growth disappeared, “and Aspasia was again the most beautiful of her fellow maidens, regaining her beauty from the most beautiful of the gods” (lines 21–23). There follows a description of her physical beauty, which concludes with the narrator's remark that because of her poverty “she was free of all the meddling and gossip typical of women” and “she added nothing superfluous or extravagant to her beauty” (p. 125, lines 7–11). The narrator's emphasis here on Aspasia's poverty as the primary cause of her behavior and appearance motivates the reader to wonder whether she would be equally austere under different circumstances.

Fortune intervenes to test Aspasia's character in the narrative's second episode: Aspasia is taken against her will to the court of the Persian satrap Cyrus, the son of Darius and Parusatis whose attempted rebellion and defeat by his brother Artaxerxes was made famous in Xenophon's *Anabasis*. Aspasia quickly became Cyrus' favorite concubine, “because of the simplicity (ἀφέλεια) of her character, the modesty of her manner, and because she was beautiful without extravagance” (p. 125, lines 19–20).²⁸ Her intelligence, too, was her ally in claiming Cyrus' affection, though we hear little about her intellectual talents in the rest of the narrative. The

²⁷ The experimental quality of the narrative is recognized by Campanile 2006: 427.

²⁸ On Aelian's Aspasia and historical concubines at the Persian court, see Briant 2002: 278–282.

narrator describes in detail the scene of Aspasia's introduction to Cyrus. Aspasia and three other Greek girls were to be paraded before the satrap during wine after a banquet. The three other girls, whose hair had been done and who had been dressed in fine clothing, were all instructed on how to seduce and flatter a powerful man. Aspasia, however, refused even to wrap herself in the richly embroidered (ποικίλον, p. 126, line 13) cloak that was expected of her. Crying aloud, "she called upon all the gods of Greece and of Freedom, which are the same," saying that she would rather die than submit, "since she believed that it was clear and acknowledged slavery (δουλείαν) to endure on one's body clothing as well as extravagant ornamentation that were foreign to one's custom" (lines 14–19). But Cyrus' ministers beat her into submission, and when she is brought before Cyrus, the satrap is delighted by the girl's stubborn will to resist, calling her the only girl among them who is "free and uncorrupted" (p. 127, lines 10–11).

In time Aspasia became more than a concubine: "Cyrus fell in love with this woman beyond measure, but he was loved in return also by her, and the intimacy between them advanced to the point that it was close to equality and did not fall short of the harmony and moderation (σωφροσύνης) of a Greek marriage" (p. 127, lines 14–18). The narrator is silent about how Aspasia's resistance was worn down and how she grew to conceive of an *erôs* for Cyrus. In the Greek romances, by contrast, the onset of *erôs* comes instantaneously and at first sight for both the male and female protagonists.²⁹ Aelian diverts from the romantic model, though, and the time that he collapses in the narrative (χρόνω δὲ ὕστερον, line 14) becomes a conspicuous lacuna in Aspasia's ethical life. The notice that their intimacy approached the morality of a Greek marriage is the narrator's rhetorical attempt to eradicate any suspicion that Aspasia has become vulnerable to the sensuous luxury of the Persian court. When Aspasia remembered her old dreams, the dove, and what the goddess had prescribed, she set up a golden statue of Aphrodite accompanied by a dove studded with precious stones, to which she offered prayers and sacrifices every day. She also sent gifts to her father and made him rich. But none of this was extravagant or excessively luxurious: "she lived with moderation (σωφροσύνη), as Greek and Persian women say" (p. 128, lines 5–6). Aspasia's indulgence in Persian wealth is given a moral gloss (i.e. it is Hellenized) by being channeled into religious and filial devotion.

The following anecdote further conveys the idea that Aspasia's simple, modest character remained unchanged in Persia. When Cyrus tried to give

²⁹ Pervo 2005: 73–74.

her an ornate necklace, she kindly declined the gift on the grounds that it was more worthy of Cyrus' mother, Parusatis. Aspasia thus "did the opposite of what women usually do, for they are terribly fond of jewelry" (p. 128, lines 27–29). When Parusatis received the necklace, she was delighted and sent gifts to Aspasia in exchange, which Aspasia also declined. As a result of her behavior in the affair of the necklace, "this woman astonished Cyrus and indisputably became a source of wonder both on account of the beauty of her body and still more on account of the nobility of her soul" (p. 129, lines 14–16). The anecdote begs comparison with the earlier scene in which Aspasia violently refused to wear the richly embroidered garment prior to being introduced to Cyrus. This time her resistance to wearing extravagant jewelry is more tactful. She does not cry out to the gods of Greece and Freedom; she does not pray for death before submitting to slavery. On the contrary, the scene illustrates that Aspasia's virtue remains intact only as a result of the fact that she has negotiated the terms of what it means to be a virtuous woman. It is not insignificant that Aelian's narrator carefully sets the scene as Cyrus approaches Aspasia to give her the necklace: "It was the middle of the day, and when he found her sleeping, slipping under the covers and lying down gently beside her, he waited silently and without moving while she slept. And when she woke and saw Cyrus, she greeted him with an embrace in the usual way" (p. 128, lines 12–17). Though she tactfully declines the necklace, she does so in the most luxurious, sensuous, and intimate of settings.

In the third and final episode of the narrative, Aspasia becomes the property of Cyrus' brother Artaxerxes after Cyrus' death in the battle of Cunaxa. Artaxerxes sought her out intentionally because he had heard about her beauty and her virtue (ἀρετήν, p. 129, line 22) and he is angered when Aspasia is finally brought before him in chains, which he orders to be exchanged with expensive jewelry (κόσμον πολυτελῆ, lines 24–25). Aspasia was resistant, of course, both because of her disposition but also because she was grieving over the loss of Cyrus. But she was finally compelled to wear the clothing given to her by the king, whereupon she appeared to be the most beautiful of women and Artaxerxes immediately became inflamed with desire. He treated her as the first of his wives and honored her to the point of excess, confident that he would persuade her to forget Cyrus and love himself no less: "and he got what he was hoping for, but after a long time and slowly (ὁπὲ δὲ καὶ βραδέως), for Aspasia's goodwill towards Cyrus, which had sunk in deeply (ἐντακεῖσα), had produced in her an affection that was hard to wash away (δυσέκνιπτον)" (p. 130, lines 1–4). Aelian here foregrounds the time required to effect Aspasia's transformation, and the

figurative language vividly conveys Aspasia's emotional depth as well as the permanence of her feelings towards Cyrus.

The narrative climaxes with the story of Artaxerxes' grief over the death of the eunuch Tiridates, a beautiful youth for whom the king was said to have intense desire. So great was the king's grief that no one dared to approach him. When three days had passed, however, Aspasia put on mourning clothes (στολήν πενθικήν, p. 130, lines 14–15) and stood in tears with lowered head before the king as he was on his way to the bath. Struck by her appearance, the king asked why she had come, and she replied that she had come to console him. He was pleased by the woman's care for him (κηδεμονίᾳ, line 20) and bid her to await his return in his chamber. When he returned from the bath, he wrapped Aspasia in the eunuch's cloak (τὴν τοῦ εὐνοῦχου στολήν, lines 22–23), laying it over the black cloak of mourning that Aspasia was already wearing. The young man's garment accentuated her own beauty and the king demanded that she visit him dressed in this way (οὕτως ἐσταλμένην, line 27) until his grief abated.³⁰ The narrative concludes with the notice that of all the king's wives, sons, and relatives, Aspasia was the only person who could restore the king, who wisely yielded and gave in to her care and consolation.

This woman who formerly defined herself according to an abstract notion of Greek freedom transforms into a substitute for the king's eunuch, by Greek standards the most debased of Persian slaves.³¹ Aelian's narrator focuses not on the wearing of the eunuch's cloak as an act of servility, but on Aspasia's role as caregiver and benefactor for a grieving lover, a role with which she herself sympathized after the death of Cyrus. Slavery, in other words, is transmogrified by the narrative into a voluntary act of charity based ostensibly on love and affection. The scene must be read in comparison with the earlier scenes of Aspasia's resistance to wearing either the richly embroidered dress of a courtesan or gaudy jewelry. In this scene, all such resistance is apparently gone. The reader wonders if this can be the same woman who, at the beginning of her Persian life, prayed for death before she would submit to such an obvious display of slavery. The narrator insists that Aspasia remains the virtuous woman that she always was, but at the same time he shows us a radically changed person. In one subtle move, though, the narrator also reveals that Aspasia's resistance has not been altogether eradicated. When Aspasia obeyed the king's order to visit him regularly wearing the eunuch's clothes, she did so "while making

³⁰ On the fetishism of Cyrus and Artaxerxes, see Puiggali 2004: 203–204.

³¹ This view persisted into the later Roman period, despite the increasing presence and influence of eunuchs at the Imperial court. See Tougher 2008: 36–53, 96–102.

herself agreeable” (χαριζομένη, line 28). This last word illustrates that her compliance was not automatic or unthinking, emphasizing instead the ethical work that Aspasia had to perform on herself in order to become an obedient slave of the king.

Aelian’s story of Aspasia is also religious. Neuhaus described Aphrodite’s tutelage of Aspasia as the *Kern* of the whole story,³² and indeed the narrative concludes with the *telos* of Aspasia’s dream that she would one day live with a man who was fine and noble. The dream is not satisfied in quite the way that Aspasia anticipated; in one sense there is no man more fine and noble than the Persian king, but Aspasia’s youthful self, proudly Greek, would have been horrified at her becoming a Persian concubine. But the intervention of Aphrodite at the beginning of the narrative is crucial for understanding Aspasia’s potential for adaptability and change, for it is from Aphrodite that Aspasia learns about the transformative power of *erôs*. The disfiguring growth (*phûma*) that appeared beneath Aspasia’s chin is an outward sign of the abiding quality of an essential nature (*phusis*). Though it upset her when she looked at herself in the mirror, that *phûma*, if it had persisted, would have prevented Aspasia from acquiring a reputation for beauty, would therefore have prevented her from drawing the attention of Cyrus’ soldiers, and therefore would have kept Aspasia at home in Phokaia, a Greek woman to the end. Through Aphrodite, though, Aspasia is relieved of the handicap of an abiding, essential nature and must come to terms with learning over time what it means to be a labile creature. The growth may have vanished overnight, but it took Aspasia far longer to realize that her Greek nature was illusory and to embrace by degrees new behaviors and customs. But the narrative also reassures that the willingness to change in such seemingly radical ways does not preclude the possibility of being a moral person.³³ To hold unwaveringly that the laying on of a eunuch’s richly embroidered clothes is the outward sign of slavery is to be constrained within an inflexible cultural paradigm and to be blind to a different expression of human affection.³⁴

Aspasia demands to be interpreted on her own terms and resists the dominant ideological frameworks by which decent women have traditionally been interpreted in Greek culture. Leaving aside Aspasia’s seemingly paradoxical ability to embody *sôphrosunê* without retaining her virginity,

³² Neuhaus 1901: 273.

³³ Cf. Puiggali 2004: 202, who reads Aspasia’s sudden adoption of “une conduite immorale” and her lack of “consistance psychologique” as indications that Aelian must have followed a different source than in the first two episodes of the narrative.

³⁴ See also Brulé 1989: 50–51.

comparison of Aelian's narrative with Greek romance is again enlightening. To be sure, the story of Aspasia reflects Aelian's familiarity with other narrative patterns, such as those seen in the *Life of Aesop*, Milesian tales, early Christian narratives, and even folklore,³⁵ but the comparison with romance is particularly helpful for understanding how Aspasia transcends the traditional paradigm for a decent woman. Despite the fact that the canonical romances all play (some more self-consciously than others) with variations on the expected *telos*,³⁶ the fact remains that romance is a genre structured around a narrative (a) of return – homeward, to a place of origin, where identity and the familiar are secure – and (b) of *erôs* contained within heterosexual marriage. Aelian's story of Aspasia flouts both of these generic conventions. Aspasia never returns to Phokaia either by sheer force of will or by the artificial intervention of Aphrodite or Tukhe. Instead, her journey tends further and further East; in this regard she is like Chariton's Kallirhoe, though unlike Kallirhoe, Aspasia lacks a Greek husband to rescue her and restore her to her Greek father(land).³⁷ Aspasia is launched against her will into an adventure world that bears a striking resemblance to the central section of romance, wherein the protagonists bounce from one obstacle or episode to another; unlike for the protagonists of romance, though, Aspasia's adventure world remains open-ended, denying the heroine and her readers the promise of return. Aelian's narrative also departs from the romantic depiction of marriage as a secure cultural institution; in the story of Aspasia even marriage itself is subject to the vicissitudes of fortune. Though it took time to develop, Aspasia's relationship with Cyrus came close to a Greek marriage, but this was hardly the *telos* of her narrative, as that relationship came to an abrupt end with Cyrus' death and Aspasia's transfer as Cyrus' property into the hands of his brother Artaxerxes. History aside,³⁸ in the fictive world that Aelian creates there is no certainty that Aspasia will remain forever Artaxerxes' faithful concubine after the story's abrupt ending. If the generic conventions of romance provide an insufficient frame within which to measure Aspasia's character, the reader can at least be certain about one thing: whatever her circumstances, Aspasia will do whatever she must to survive and also to remain a virtuous being.

But does Aelian's Aspasia have a voice of her own? Is she able to fulfill the dream of the chorus in Euripides' *Medea* and speak outside of the

³⁵ Puiggali 2004: 199 (following the nineteenth-century studies by Chassang and Schmid), Pervo 2005: 78–84, and Anderson 2000: 29–31.

³⁶ Whitmarsh 2011: 177–213.

³⁷ For a fuller comparison with Chariton's Kallirhoe, see Pervo 2005: 79–81. ³⁸ Plu. *Art.* 27.

male discourse within which her narrative is constructed?³⁹ It is telling that Aelian offers no specific examples of Aspasia's wisdom or counsel at the court of Cyrus, and equally problematic is the narrator's remark that "someone might say that, when she was speaking, he was listening to a Siren" (εἶπεν ἄν τις, λαλούσης αὐτῆς, ἀκούειν Σειρῆνος, p. 125, lines 6–7). The allusion is a commonplace for the seductive beauty of a woman's voice, but the implication of danger is inescapable. Aelian's narrative elaborates the figure of a woman who transcends sanctioned categories, but it does so by means of paradox, which is to say by means of manipulating in surprising ways the standards and terms of female virtue as it has traditionally been understood. Paradox affords the possibility of representing a woman who is subversive, but also comprehensible (and therefore containable) in her subversion. The question might legitimately be raised that this kind of subversion is not subversive in any meaningful way (how effective are state-controlled protests against the state?). The Siren-like quality of Aspasia's voice, however, is a sign that beyond the necessary comprehensibility of her paradoxical representation within narrative there resides a subjectivity that is disruptive, if not destructive of men's understanding of the world. In this way the virtuous concubine, even when she exists as an object of pleasure for men, is a potentially dangerous subject. For elaborating the even more dangerous fantasy of a woman's complete autonomy and freedom, Aelian turns at the beginning of Book 13 from history to myth.

Atalante

Animals and the feminine intersect in Aelian's story of Atalante. Atalante was an unwanted child. Her father Iasion exposed her on the grounds that "he was in need not of daughters, but of males" (*VH* 13.1, p. 152, lines 2–3 Dilts). The man to whom Iasion entrusted the baby did not kill her, but left her in the dense woods of Mount Parthenion beside a spring where a cave had been formed in the rocks. Fortune arranged it so that a bear whose cubs had been killed by hunters discovered the baby; then "by some divine guidance" (line 10), the bear took pleasure in the baby and suckled it. The same hunters who had killed the bear's cubs kept an eye on the animal and eventually stole the baby away from the bear and gave her the name Atalante. The girl grew up in the mountains, and when she became a young woman, "she had a desire for virginity and fled intercourse with men and longed for solitude" (ἦρα παρθενίας καὶ τὰς

³⁹ E. *Med.* 410–430.

τῶν ἀνδρῶν ὀμίλιας ἔφευγε καὶ ἐρημίαν ἐπόθει, lines 22–24), retreating to her lofty mountain hideaway in Arcadia, which the narrator describes in vivid detail. The setting “indicated the most respectable and at the same time chaste dwelling place of a virgin” (σεμνότατόν τε ἅμα καὶ σώφρονα παρθενῶνα ἐδείκνυεν, p. 153, lines 21–22). I will say more about Aelian’s description of the cave below.

Atalante slept on the skins of animals she hunted, her food was their meat, and she drank water. She wore simple clothing in the style of Artemis, whom she said she emulated also “in wishing to be a virgin through to the end” (ἐν τῷ παρθένος εἶναι διὰ τέλους ἐθέλειν, p. 154, line 1). She was very fast and could outrun any animal or man who had designs on her, and men did fall in love with her on account of her exceptional beauty. After a second vivid description, this time of Atalante’s physical appearance, the narrator concludes the *logos* with a dynamic account of the midnight attack on the virgin by the two centaurs Hulaios and Rhoikos. They come reveling with torches and garlands, “wicked suitors who with wanton violence and mad frenzy were paying the full price for their intended bride before the marriage” (κακοὶ μνηστῆρες, σὺν ὕβρει καὶ οἷστρω τὰ ἔδνα τῶν γάμων προεκτελοῦντες, p. 155, lines 18–19). Their plot did not escape Atalante’s notice, and when she saw the half-human, half-animal revelers advancing, she knew who they were, and fearlessly fired off two arrows, killing both.⁴⁰ The story ends abruptly with the narrator’s remark: “so much for Atalante, the daughter of Iasion” (ὕπερ μὲν τῆς Ἰασίωνος Ἀταλάντης τοσαῦτα, p. 156, lines 2–3).

The story of Atalante stands out in Aelian’s collection. Exceeded in length only by the story of Aspasia, the narrative offers a compelling account of Atalante’s early life in three *ekphraseis* that describe her mountain dwelling, her physical beauty, and her violent defense of her chastity. The late thirteenth-century Byzantine scribe who excerpted portions of the *VH* in the codex now known as Vaticanus graecus 96 (Φ) thought the story so remarkable that he even removed it from its traditional place (13.1) and repositioned it as the final passage, to serve as a kind of epilogue to his copy of the collection.⁴¹ The narrative celebrates Atalante as a model of Stoic virtues: she remains committed to chastity and virginity, she leads a simple lifestyle and shuns the superfluous vanities of urban life, and she lives in harmony with nature. All of these are ideals that can be identified throughout Aelian’s earlier works.

⁴⁰ For the death of the centaurs, see also Call. *Dian.* 221–224 and Apollod. 1.105–106.

⁴¹ Dilts 1971: 6.

Aelian developed his narrative of Atalante from traditional material, but we cannot be certain about who precisely Aelian's sources were. Though there were two main traditions about Atalante (one Arcadian, one Boeotian), both traditions likely point back to a single Artemis-type figure.⁴² Aelian's emphasis on Atalante as a paradigm of chastity and austere erotic morality is all the more apparent when one considers the narratives that he chose *not* to include in this *logos*. We hear nothing, for example, about Atalante's participation in the hunt for the Calydonian boar, nor that she was one of the crew aboard the Argo.⁴³ Aelian does not even acknowledge the famous story of Atalante's foot race. At some later time, after she found her parents, her father urged her to marry, and so she challenged her suitors to a foot race: those whom she defeated she punished with death and only the man who bested her could claim her as a bride. Eventually, after many suitors had died, Melanion fell in love with Atalante, but during his own foot race with her, he distracted her by throwing in her way some golden apples, a gift from Aphrodite. Because Atalante reached down to pick up the apples she lost the race and became the wife of Melanion. She later gave birth to Parthenopaios, one of the seven who marched against Thebes. A further story claims that once, during a hunt, Atalante and Melanion came across a temple of Zeus; after having sex in the temple they were both transformed into lions.⁴⁴

All this Aelian could have included in his *logos*, but he did not. Jettisoning the episodes of Atalante's participation in the Calydonian boar hunt and the expedition of the Argonauts erases her involvement with the world of male heroes. By refusing to look forward to Atalante's defeat by and marriage to Melanion, Aelian's version of the story suggests that the huntress' virginity is a natural state to be defended. Aelian's Atalante retains her maidenhood right through to the end, just as she wished, dwelling in her most respectable and chaste *parthenôn*, and therefore suspended as a model of virginity and perfect *sôphrosunê*.

But something is wrong with this picture. The narrator's commentary on his *ekphraseis* reveals that he is self-consciously aware of the artificiality, the constructedness of an idealized Atalante who is made to seem like an extension of her natural surroundings. Before describing Atalante's

⁴² Rose 1959: 259.

⁴³ Call. *Dian.* 215–220; Ov. *Met.* 8.380–444; Hyg. *Fab.* 173–174; Apollod. 1.68–71, 112 (cf. A.R. 1.769–773); Philostr.Jun. *Im.* 2. For the depiction of Atalante as a liminal figure and as a subversive/transgressive outsider on classical vases, see Barringer 1996.

⁴⁴ In accounts by Euripides and Ovid, this successful suitor was Hippomenes, not Melanion. For the story of the footrace and the metamorphosis, see Apollod. 3.107–109; Hyg. *Fab.* 185; Ov. *Met.* 10.560–707; and Nonn. *D.* 12.87–89 and 48.180–182. On Parthenopaios, see Hyg. *Fab.* 70, 99.

dwelling, the narrator interjects, “For what harm does it do us also to hear about Atalante’s cave, like Calypso’s cave in Homer?” (τί γὰρ ἡμᾶς λυπεῖ καὶ ἄντρον Ἀταλάντης ἀκοῦσαι, ὥς τὸ τῆς Καλυψοῦς τὸ ἐν Ὀμήρῳ; p. 153, lines 1–2). The same defensiveness returns in the narrator’s description of Atalante’s physical beauty: “And come, let us describe also what she looked like, if there’s no harm in it. And there is no harm, since from this, too, there would come additional experience and skill with words” (φέρει δὲ καὶ τὸ εἶδος αὐτῆς, εἴ τι μὴ λυπεῖ, διαγράφωμεν· λυπεῖ δὲ οὐδέν, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐκ τούτων προσγένοιτ’ ἂν λόγων τε ἐμπειρία καὶ τέχνη, p. 154, lines 7–9). The literary value of *ekphrasis* trumps the possibility of harm. But the rhetorical questions could only be asked if the possibility of harm were not incomprehensible or irrational. Even to ask the question “what harm is there?” (twice) implies that harm is indeed lurking just out of sight. Aelian’s narrator is aware that listening to words that paint beautiful images in the mind can be a dangerous activity, and so he must dispel the fear that his *ekphrasis* of Atalante is particularly dangerous.⁴⁵

I use the term *ekphrasis* here not in the sense of a description of a work of art (a modern meaning of the ancient term),⁴⁶ but as it was understood by teachers and practitioners of rhetoric in antiquity. For writers like Aelian, *ekphrasis* was any description that conjured a vivid mental picture in the mind of its reader or audience. The power of *ekphrasis* lay in its ability to make vividly apparent that which was absent, and that vividness (*enargeia*) was achieved by the formation of images in the mind (*phantasiai*).⁴⁷ Given the phantasmatic nature of this experience, it is understandable why *ekphrasis*, an ostensibly benign literary practice, might generate philosophical unease. Seneca the Elder, for example, expresses anxiety about orators whose dynamic performances of *ekphrasis* make it seem as if they have gone mad, unable to distinguish between reality and the mental images they conjure.⁴⁸ But Aelian’s narrator is concerned less with the instability of his own mental state than with the potential harm that his *ekphraseis* may inflict on his audience. It is significant that he defends the second *ekphrasis* as providing “experience and skill with words”: the narrator is concerned with the developing minds of his audience, and the claim that his *ekphraseis* have a propaedeutic value shrouds the anxiety that

⁴⁵ There is no such trepidation in Aelian’s *ekphrasis* of Aspasia or of the Vale of Tempe (*VH* 3.1), in which he was following Theopompus (Theon, *Prog.* 68.12–16 Patillon) and Dio of Prusa (Synesius, *Dio* 3, lines 11–21 Terzaghi). See Anderson 1993: 146–147, Johnson 1997: 76, and Campanile 2006: 425.

⁴⁶ Webb 2009: 28–37. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 103–105. See also Anderson 1993: 144–155 and Elsner 2002.

⁴⁸ Dross 2004–2005 and Webb 2009: 104.

the seductive *phantasiai* conjured by his words might have too powerful an effect. The sophist-narrator of Philostratus' *Eikones* similarly offsets the deluded sensuousness of viewing and listening with the conceit that his performance is an exercise in rhetorical training. As the narrator guides a young boy and a crowd of besotted *meirakia* along a luxurious portico in a seaside villa, a site of *truphê*, he interprets for them a series of paintings set in the walls (*Im.* pr. 4–5). Indulging in the sensuous pleasures of the experience is thus channeled into a beneficial *paideia*. For Aelian and Philostratus alike, reinscribing *ekphrasis* as educational is an attempt to neutralize the potential danger posed by its illusory sensuousness.⁴⁹

The physical description of Atalante is prefaced by the notice that her beauty was so powerful that men fell in love with her not only by sight, but also merely from what was said about her (ἐκ φήμης, p. 154, lines 5–6). Aelian's remark should be taken as a warning. Atalante's ability (or curse) to attract lovers based merely on her reputation recalls two such instances in Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Kleitophon*. Kallisthenes and Thersandros both fall in love with the heroine of the novel when they hear about her beauty and without ever having seen her with their own eyes. The former becomes a "lover from hearing" (ἐξ ἀκοῆς ἐραστής, 2.13.1) and the latter, after his slave describes Leukippe, is "filled with an apparition (φαντάσματος) as if of beauty" (6.4.4). The narrator Kleitophon derides such erotic vulnerability to words, "for so great is the wanton violence in those who lack self-control that even by their ears do they lapse luxuriously (τρυφᾶν) into desire and because of words they suffer what wounded eyes minister to the soul" (2.13.1).⁵⁰ Care must be taken regarding the seductive power of women who are made to exist only as *phantasiai* in the mind. Atalante's cave could indeed turn out to be a Calypso's cave, transforming the reader into an Odysseus who has given himself over to sensuous pleasure and lost his way.⁵¹ By signaling the harm latent in his *ekphrasis* of Atalante, Aelian's narrator reminds his audience of the illusory quality of the young woman his words are about to conjure.

Implicating his audience in erotic fantasizing in this way, Aelian's narrator then shows that the fantasy of Atalante is a particularly destructive one, for the intensity of her beauty is matched by her ability to inspire fear (φοβεῖν, p. 154, line 25):

⁴⁹ See also Philostr.Jun. *Im.* Pr. 4. On the *Eikones* of the Philostrati, see Webb 2009: 187–190, Dubel 2009, and Newby 2009.

⁵⁰ Morales 2004: 88–89 and Webb 2009: 183.

⁵¹ For the *ekphrasis* of the cave as a *mise en abyme*, see Campanile 2006: 427.

οὐδεὶς ἂν ἰδὼν αὐτὴν ἡράσθη ῥάθυμος ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλ' οὐδ' ἂν ἐτόλμησεν ἀντιβλέπειν τὴν ἀρχήν· τοσαύτη μετὰ τῆς ὥρας κατέλαμπεν αἴγλη τοὺς ὀρῶντας. δεινὴ δὲ ἦν ἐντυχεῖν τὰ τε ἄλλα καὶ τῷ σπανίῳ. οὐ γὰρ ἂν αὐτὴν τις εὐκόλως εἶδεν· ἀλλ' ἀδοκῆτως καὶ ἀπροόπτως ἐπεφάνη διώκουσα θηρίον ἢ ἀμυνομένη τινά, ὥσπερ ἀστὴρ διὰ ττουσα, εἴτα ἀπέκρυπτεν αὐτὴν διαθέουσα ἢ δρυμὸν ἢ λόχμην ἢ τι ἄλλο τῶν ἐν ὄρει δάσος. (p. 154, line 25–p. 155, line 6)

No passionless man would fall in love upon seeing her. On the contrary, he wouldn't even dare to look upon her to begin with, so great the radiance combined with beauty that shone upon those who saw her. And she was fearsome to meet, especially for the rarity of doing so. For no one would catch sight of her easily, but unexpectedly and unforeseen she appeared, chasing a wild beast or defending herself against one, shooting like a star, then she would hide herself running into a copse or thicket or some other cover in mountainous places.

Atalante's appearance before the eyes of men was rare and fleeting; no sooner was she seen than she camouflaged herself amid the foliage of her natural surroundings. Her beauty, whether perceived through the eyes or fantasized about from what people say (*phême*), inflames men to become her lover, and yet she can never be seized. A chaste huntress herself, she performs her role only in the active voice, refusing to become the hunted.⁵² The perfect virgin, the model of a naturalized *sôphrosunê*, turns out to be impossible to contain. Intensely desired, she paradoxically will never satisfy men's desire for her. The narrator's self-consciously ekphrastic mode of depiction further underlines that it is only through the power of *ekphrasis* that this woman will ever be contained and brought before the eyes of men. The perfect virgin, the ultimate *phantasia* within a masculine ethics of desire and the body, is also a projection of masculine fear.⁵³

Aelian's *logos* about Atalante naturalizes the social ideal of female chastity, but that same process of making female chastity *seem* natural also paradoxically reveals it to be a product of culture. Aelian concludes the *logos* abruptly with a description of Atalante's defensive killing of the lustful centaurs, aborting her narrative before its traditional *telos* and thus denying readers the satisfaction of the foot race, the golden apples, and Melanion's conquest. Aelian's Atalante, enacting her own will to remain a virgin right through to the end (παρθένος εἶναι διὰ τέλους ἐθέλειν, p. 154, line 1), refuses to be a wife or mother and therefore disrupts the generative processes of

⁵² Brulé 1989: 59.

⁵³ For the contemporary debate about the benefits and disadvantages of virginity, see Sor. *Gunaikēia* 1.30. Cf. also the story of Rhodopis at Ach. Tat. 8.12.

nature as it has been constructed by men. In his *ekphrasis* of Atalante, Aelian leaves suspended in the minds of his readers the image of a woman who lives on her own terms, out of the reach of men.

Conclusion

In the two longest chapters of the *VH* Aelian takes up the stories of two women who structure their ethical lives around the rejection of *truphê* in favor of austerity and simplicity. In this regard at least they serve as models of female decency. But Aelian's depiction of these women also reveals complexities in their characters that challenge the paradigm of morality as it has traditionally been constructed by men.

Aspasia of Phokaia at first, like a good Greek woman, resists the foreign luxury of Persian life, but after being violently compelled to parade herself like a *hetaira* before Cyrus the Younger, she learns gradually to negotiate for herself a style of moderation between Greek austerity and Persian excess. Guided by Aphrodite and understanding the transformative power of *erôs*, Aspasia by the end of the narrative voluntarily dons the cloak of a eunuch for the grieving Persian king; so altered, though, is the conceptual schema of Aspasia's life that the narrative pleads for the act to be interpreted not as an expression of servility but as one of sympathetic human affection. It may be said that Aelian's Aspasia projects the male fantasy of a woman who finally learns and accepts her status as a sexual object. But Aspasia's subtly shifting morality also reveals a subjectivity that has the potential of destabilizing masculine ethics.

Aelian's Atalante is more radically other, rejecting completely the world of men and enacting her own will to resist the confining structures of male power. Atalante seems in her dedication to chastity and simple living to act as a model for traditional Greek morality, but the self-consciously ekphrastic mode with which Aelian depicts Atalante reveals the artifice required to conjure this fantasy of female virtue. She is desired by anyone lucky enough to glimpse her, but she can never be possessed. Patriarchy dictates that a woman must preserve her virginity so that her body will remain pure for her husband. Atalante, however, manipulates that masculine ideal for women as the means of her own independence. Atalante's utter rejection of the erotic impulse and her commitment to remain a virgin right through to the end disrupt the generative narrative that men have written for women: Aelian's Atalante will never be a wife or mother.

Stamm has argued that the *VH* was written as a collection of models for advanced students of rhetoric, while Campanile sees the work as light

entertainment for a public who wanted to read about art, history, and philosophy in a style that was not too demanding.⁵⁴ The *VH* certainly conveys an interest in *paideia* and in the educative value of its content, and though I remain open to the possibility that Aelian's work was used in rhetorical training, the chapters on Aspasia and Atalante at least are far more than *mere* school exercises. Likewise, the reading public imagined by Campanile may have enjoyed these narratives as nothing more than charming anecdotes, but the above interpretations show that these narratives may also have appealed to a readership willing to think critically about the received morality of the classical tradition. Aelian's Aspasia and Atalante are not two-dimensional models of traditional feminine virtues; on the contrary, they are provocative figures that compel careful readers to rethink the moral criteria by which both male and female subjects are constructed in Roman Imperial life.

⁵⁴ Stamm 2003: 280–286 and Campanile 2006: 429.

Conclusion

*"Nature produces animals with many voices and many sounds, you might say. . . "*¹

Aelian is characterized by a series of paradoxes. He was Roman and admired for his commitment to Roman character, yet within the *NA* he distances himself from Roman culture, coming out as a Roman only in the pages of the *VH*, and there always with qualification. Though Aelian's choice to cite no Latin authors in the *NA* could be based on his adoption of "pure" Greek as his literary medium – why cite a Latin writer when "better" Greek writers are available? – that choice nevertheless increases the distance that he places between himself and Roman culture. Furthermore, he never married and raised a family as a good Roman man should. His literary aesthetic was mainstream, and yet he taps into the anxieties that always attended *poikilia*: concerns that his varied style was a sign of effeminacy and a lack of intellectual rigor. He must be considered a Stoic in the general sense, but his work either questions or abandons some central tenets of Stoic doctrine, namely the emphasis on philosophical dialectic, the rejection of reason in the approach to natural phenomena, and the belief that non-human animals lack the capacity for reason. He was a sophist, but he abandoned a career of declamation for one of private study and writing. He was interested in exploring the far reaches of the world, but only insofar as that world was mediated through books: he never left Italy, nor set foot on a boat. He wields a voice of strongly conservative morality, but the open quality of his work embraces alternative moral sensibilities: the contradictions of the library are sites for continually re-reading nature amid an ever-shifting series of frames, revealing the constructed quality of any single moral or ideological framework. The possibility then arises that, if the framework is culturally constructed, then it may be changed.

Aelian voices this relativistic position early in the *NA*, when he says in the preface that "not everything to everyone is beautiful, nor to everyone does everything seem worthy of study." The allusion to the Platonic *Hippias*

¹ *NA* 5.51.

Major figures Aelian as a new Socrates, whose iconoclastic persona suits the paradoxical Aelian in many ways. But evoking Socrates also raises the specter of a philosophical tradition for which Aelian’s literary project would have generated derision or outrage. Aelian’s preface and epilogue to the *NA* are therefore tinged with defensiveness about his choices and his work, and he feels he must respond to criticisms that the objects of his study are unworthy of his time and even that he has approached them in a way unbecoming of an ordered mind. But precisely these two aspects of the *NA* – its focus on animals and its stylistic *poikilia* – are what facilitate Aelian’s most penetrating cultural critiques.

There was, of course, a long tradition of writing about animals in Greek literature, a tradition that extends back to the animal similes of the Homeric epics. But Aelian conceives of writing about animals in the way that he does as a provocative contrast to the treatment of animals in a Roman context in the third century CE. The epilogue to the *NA* is obsessed with hunting. Aelian imagines his thought as “tracking down” (ἀνίχνευσε) his scholarly prey as if it were a quarry. Defending the work’s compositional structure, he says that by means of variety he was “hunting” (θηρῶν) for an enticement to reading. And this scholarly, literary hunting he contrasts with catching an animal’s scent and laying hands upon an animal’s limbs – there’s nothing noble in that kind of hunt, he says.

τί πρὸς ταῦτα Κέφαλοί τε καὶ Ἱππόλυτοι καὶ εἴ τις ἐν ὄρεσιν ἀγρίοις
θηρία μετελθεῖν δεινὸς ἕτερος ἢ αὐτὸς πάλιν τῶν ἐν ὑδροθηρίᾳ οἶδεν, ὥς ἢ
Μητροδώρος ὁ Βυζάντιος ἢ Λεωνίδης ὁ τοῦτου παῖς ἢ Δημόστρατος ἢ
ἄλλοι τινὲς θηραταὶ ἰχθύων οἱ δεινότατοι, πολλοὶ ναὶ μὰ Δία; καὶ γραφικοὶ
δὲ ἄνδρες, μέγα αὐτοὺς φρονεῖν ἀνέπειθεν ἢ ἵππος γραφεὶς κάλλιστα, ὥς
Ἀγλαοφῶντα, ἢ νεβρός, ὥς Ἀπελλῆν, ἢ πλασθὲν βοῖδιον, ὥς Μύρωνα, ἢ
ἄλλο τι. (*NA* ep., p. 431, lines 15–22)

What compared with this are the Kephaloses and Hippolutoses and whoever else is skilled at going after beasts in the wild hillsides, or moreover is cunning at fishing, like Metrodoros of Byzantion, or his son Leonidas, or Demostratos or some other fishermen who are most skilled, many for sure, by Zeus? And artists too, what was it convinced them to think they were so great? A very beautifully painted horse in the case of Aglaophon, or a fawn in the case of Apelles, or a sculpted calf, in the case of Muron, or something else.

The mythological references are motivated: Kephalos and Hippolutos were both famous hunters whose passion for the sport ended in their own misfortune or destruction.² But in the second string of references, Aelian

² On Kephalos, see Pherecyd. fr. 34 (*FGrH*), *Ov. Met.* 7.675–865, Apollod. 3.198, and Hyg. *Fab.* 189; on Hippolytos, see E. *Hipp.* 15–19.

takes issue not just with the activity of hunting itself, but also with those who write hunting literature: Metrodoros of Byzantion, his son Leonidas, and the Roman senator from Greece Demostratos all wrote manuals on fishing.³ Aelian's book, on the other hand, does not teach hunting or fishing, though Aelian certainly used those three writers as sources.⁴ Nor is his book merely mimetic: the classical painters Aglaophon and Apelles and the sculptor Muron were only capable of producing lifeless representations. The *NA* strives for something more dynamic: to display the character, forms, wisdom, shrewdness, justice, prudence, courage, affection, and piety of animals – all virtues associated more with humans than with animals. But when humans are compared with their animal counterparts, humans are found lacking, and Aelian says that he grieves to celebrate the piety of animals and to censure the impiety of humans. The obsession with hunting necessarily evokes the animal spectacles and the staged hunts (*venationes*) of the Roman arena. But Aelian's moralizing animal narratives imply an interrogation of that central institution of Roman public life. Extracting animals, the most abject creatures of the arena, from the scene of death, Aelian finds in them and brings to light (ὕπ' αὐγὰς ἄγει) qualities that are unsettlingly human. Animals living in harmony with nature are not just positive foils for wicked human beings. Humanizing animals as Aelian does, he challenges readers to face the suffering inflicted upon abject creatures, whether they are caught in the mountains or in the sea or slain in the arena. Aelian's moral emphasis, dissolving the "firm" boundary between human and animal, interrogates other categories, too – slave, barbarian, woman – and ultimately asks what qualities will finally rescue a being from the arena.

In the eliciting of pity for the suffering of non-human animals, then, the *NA* has some kinship with the Oppianic *Halieutika* and *Kunêgetika*, for while those texts purport to teach hunting and fishing, their elaborate similes assimilate animal suffering to human suffering and provoke in readers a keen awareness of the tragic effects of their violent sport of choice. But whereas the Oppianic poems speak directly to imperial power, Aelian explicitly frames his text as a turning away not just from imperial power but also from the ambitious crowds who swarm around the center of political authority, those "whetted for honors and influence." This is not to say that Aelian is not interested in imperial politics or in the figure of the emperor himself. On the contrary, Aelian has much to say about

³ See Ath. 13c and Wellmann 1895.

⁴ Leonidas: *NA* 2.6, 2.50, 3.18, and 12.39; Demostratos: *NA* 13.21, 15.4, 15.9, 15.19.

kingship, about political philosophy, and he has a shrewd understanding of the role that animals play in the symbolic vocabulary of power. But Aelian also knows that even when they are surrounded by wise men, kings will do what they want. Eagles tread their own lofty course through the sky, and they pay no mind to the cackling of crows below. And so Aelian chooses not to speak to kings, addressing his moralizing narratives instead only to those whom he might not regard as “worthless judges” (πονηροὺς κριταῖς).

The supreme authority for Aelian is nature itself, φύσις ἀπόρρητος, a divine force in the cosmos that is unspeakable, mysterious. Expressions of the divine in the *NA* are manifold, but alongside gods like Zeus and Apollo, Aelian is especially interested in the power of the sun, Helios in Greek, but exerting its celestial influence upon all the nations of the world. Aelian does not mention the cult of Emesa explicitly, but the pervasiveness of the sun god in the *NA* must be connected at least in part to the popularity of the solar cult resulting from Julia Domna’s family ties to the priests of Elagabal. Imperial politics aside, Aelian’s reverence for Helios was also part of his universalizing literary project. A divine figure recognized by all and therefore transcending his particular local identities, Helios is the perfect god for a text that absorbs the animal lore from a variety of cultural traditions within the all-embracing medium of Hellenism. The power of Helios blazed forth from the exotic eastern stone for Herakleis, a widow of Tarentum in Italy; in Egypt, the sun is symbolized by phoenix, hawk, and bull, elephants instinctively worship the solar deity, and the dwelling place of Helios is the heavenly lion; and among the Brahmins in India, Helios who looks upon all things (τὸν πάντ’ ἐφορῶντα “Ἡλιον) recognized the piety of a boy and granted him a long life in the form of a hoopoe.⁵ There is a deep connection between Aelian’s reverence for Helios and the moralizing orientation of the text. The sun god was a globalizing divinity for Aelian, generative of all life, and Aelian envisions himself as the one moralizing writer worthy of admiration (θαυμάσαι ἄξιος) because he brings to light (ὑπ’ αὐγὰς ἄγει), that is, restores to Helios the virtues residing in animals and lacking in humans.⁶

But even while Aelian posits the divinely sanctioned superiority of his own moral position, the structural variety of the *NA* suggests a multiplicity wherein the stridently moral voice of “Aelian” the author is revealed to be the expression of only one culturally specific ideological framework. Built into the *NA*, then, is the potentiality for ideological transformation, even of the voice that apparently authorized the text. Rejecting an overarching

⁵ *NA* 8.21, 6.58, 10.24, 11.11, 7.40, 12.7, and 16.5.

⁶ *NA* ep., p.431, lines 22–26.

linear narrative and a single, master discourse, the *poikilia* of the *NA* is not just the flowering meadow or garland described by Aelian. It is also the polyphony of nature, its roaring, mooing, and whinnying, its braying and bleating and snarling, its grunts, whistles, gnashing, singing, melody, and lisping. It is the polychromatic feathering of exotic birds by the Ganges. It is the vibrant dappling upon the helical surface of a mollusk's calcareous shell at the bottom of the sea. It is the burrowing of subterranean creatures. And though it speaks in a polished Greek acquired from an urban life at the "center" of the Roman Empire, the *NA* is also the utterance of Egyptians, Ethiopians, Indians, Scythians, and Syrians. The *poikilia* of Aelian's miscellany translates the cacophony of the world into a beautiful sound, *kalliphônia*. The many-voicedness of the collection seems to be in tension with the assertive morality that divides the world between Greeks and barbarians, masters and slaves, men and women, male and female, chastity and perversion, rational human and irrational beast. But it would be a mistake to take Aelian's moralizing voice over and above the collection's more centrifugal tendencies, as the text itself breaks down those binary oppositions. Aelian's moralizing is a figural gesture, a sign of his shame at the world and of his own shame at being human. But it is that very sense of shame that separates him from his world and allows him to recede from the crowd of declaiming sophists, to become something other, a writer of animal tales.⁷ As such, Aelian's moralizing should be understood not as an instrument of power, but as an expression of disavowal and longing for a transformation of the world. It is left to his readers to find their own ways into the warren, to exploit contradictions, and to experience the metamorphosis that the *NA* invites.

⁷ Cf. Lawlor 2008: 174.

Appendix

Reconstructing Aelian's Katêgoria tou gunnidos

Though the text of the *Katêgoria tou gunnidos* is generally believed to be lost, certain fragments from the *Souda* on a “Syrian *hetaira*” or “Syrian mime” and others known to be by Aelian, if they are not from the lost oration itself, may at least be helpful in reconstructing Aelian’s diatribe against Elagabalus. I print first the fragments that Hercher collected under the title “De mima Syra,” fr. 123 Hercher, fr. 126a–e Domingo-Forasté:

1. ἄνθος προσώπω ἐπιφυόμενον, οἷον οὐδὲ εἷς λειμών νοτερός τε καὶ ἄβρὸς καὶ εὐθαλὴς τεκεῖν ὑπὸ δρόσῳ ἑαρινῇ οἶδεν, ἐρύθημά τε ὥραϊον καὶ μειδίωμα ἡδιστον. (*Souda* ε- 3095)

A flower blossoming upon the countenance, such as not even one meadow, moist, luxurious, and in bloom, can produce with the dew of spring, and a beautiful blush and the sweetest smile.

2. γύναιον ἐκ Συρίας καθημαξυμένον ὑπὸ παντὸς τοῦ προσιόντος· ἑταῖρα γὰρ ἦν ἐμφανὴς καὶ τῶν ἐν τοῖς μίμοις δι’ ἀκολασίαν περιπαθεστέρα, τοῖς τε φαινομένοις ἐς τὴν κοινὴν ὄψιν σχήμασιν ἐκκαλουμένη τοὺς ὀρώντας ἐς τὰ πάθη τοῦ σώματος, καὶ κατατείνουσα τὸν δῆμον καὶ ὅσον μετὰ τοῦ δήμου πρὸς συῶδι τινὰ καὶ μανικὴν ἀσέλγειαν. (*Souda* κ- 82)

A womanish thing from Syria well ridden by everyone who approached. For she was known to be a courtesan and more passionate than those in the mimes on account of her incontinence, and by means of posturing that was on display for all to see, enticing those who saw her to experiences of the body, and drawing the people, and whatever was with the people, down toward a swinish and mad licentiousness.

3. σύνοδοί τινες ἐς αὐτῆς ἐγίνοντο καὶ συμφοιτήσεις ἀκολάστων ἀνδρῶν καὶ γυναικῶν ἀσελγῶν καὶ μαιρακίων ἐξώλη βίον προσηρημένων. (*Souda* ε- 1382)

There were certain gatherings at her house and comings together of undisciplined men and licentious women and teenagers who had chosen a ruined life.

4. κρίσεως δ' ὡς ἐν ἀκολάστοις εὐθείας οὐ διήμαρτε περὶ τὴν αἴρεσιν τῆς μιμάδος· σὺν κάλλει γὰρ λαμπρῷ τοῦ σώματος ποικίλως ἤσκητο τὴν εὐαπάτητον παιδείαν. (*Souda* κ- 2443)

And he/she did not fail in proper judgment – so far as one can speak of proper judgment among the incontinent – concerning the choice of the mime, for with the radiant beauty of her body she practiced a curriculum of deception.

5. ὑγρῶς γὰρ κραδαιομένη καὶ τοῖς ποσὶ χαμαιτυπῆς, εὖστολος γινομένη, ἐνίκα πάντας τοὺς τῶν θαυματοποιῶν ἐξηγουμένους· φωνὴν τε ἔχουσα ἡδεῖαν καὶ ταύτην μετὰ τέχνης ἀφιείσα οὐδεὸς τῶν ἐπ' ᾧσμάσι θαυμαζομένων ἐκρίθη δευτέρα. ἅτε δὴ οὐκ ἄπειρος ἐρωτικῆς περιεργίας, ἀκκιζομένη σὺν καιρῷ καὶ πρὸς ζηλοτυπίαν εὐφυῶς ἄγουσα τὸν ἄνδρα, ἑαυτῇ μὲν πλοῦτον οὐκ εὐκαταφρόνητον οἶσεν, ἐκείνον δὲ κατὰ βαιὸν τηκόμενον τῷ ἔρωτι ἀπήλλαξε τῶν τῆδε. (*Souda* υ- 35)

For quivering fluidly and beating the ground with her feet, being well dressed, she defeated all the leading acrobats. And possessing a sweet voice and using it skillfully, she was judged second to none of those admired for singing. Indeed, since she was not inexperienced in erotic sophistication, affecting indifference at the right time and cleverly driving the man towards jealousy, she brought herself not inconsiderable wealth, but him, wasting away little by little with desire, she set free from his present state.

Fragment 1 on its own provides nothing decisive, and it may not even be part of the same text as fragments 2–5. The imagery of the flowering meadow, however, typical of Aelian's aesthetic *poikilia*, is exactly how Aelian would have evoked the emperor's youthful beauty (Hdn. 5.3.7).

Fragment 2 seems likely to have actually belonged to the *Katêgoria*. The behavior of this “womanish thing (γύναιον) from Syria,” who debased the people to a “swinish and mad licentiousness (ἀσελγείαν),” fits Aelian's description of the womanish tyrant (γύννις) who “shamed Roman affairs with his total licentiousness (ἀσελγεία).” Granted, a γύναιον (“a womanish thing”) is not the same thing as a γύννις (“a womanish man”), but I posit that in the *Katêgoria* Aelian would have used a number of different labels for the emperor, probably even modulating grammatical gender – masculine, feminine, and neuter – to convey the instability of Elagabalus' gender presentations. Not only did the emperor perform and identify with feminine roles (wife, mistress, queen, D.C. 80.14.4), but he also apparently sought to alter his physical sex (D.C. 80.16.7). Dio also tells of how Elagabalus would wander the streets of Rome at night wearing a

woman's clothes and wig and visit taverns and brothels, where "driving out the courtesans, he would become the prostitute himself" (τὰς ἐταίρας ἐξελαύνων ἐπορνεύετο, D.C. 80.13.2); eventually he even transformed the imperial palace itself into a brothel. The dangerous erotic enticement of the movements of the courtesan's body in the fragment also fits with contemporary descriptions of Elagabalus' ecstatic ritual dancing in public for the sun god and the astonished reaction of his Roman onlookers (Hdn. 5.3.8–9; D.C 80.11.2, 14.3).

Fragment 3, speaking of the "gatherings" (σύνοδοι) and "comings together" (συμφοιτήσεις) at the house of the *gunaiōn*, evokes the rumors of licentious sexual activity that took place in the palace. The sexual innuendo in the fragment is clear: the words σύνδοξ and συμφοιτήσις are both euphemisms for sexual intercourse, and why else would incontinent men, licentious women, and ruined teenagers assemble beneath the roof of this *gunaiōn*? The fragment finds its parallel in Dio, who mentions the many women and men conducted to the palace by the emperor's agents for his personal pleasure (D.C. 80.13.4). There is a significant difference: the people in the fragment eagerly flock to the residence of the *gunaiōn* of their own accord, while the need for intermediaries in Dio's anecdote implies that those who came to the imperial palace for sex were involuntary participants. The discrepancy is easily explained: for Dio, those conducted to the palace are victims of the emperor's tyranny, while for the moralist Aelian, the sexual indecency of the *gunaiōn* infects the people, a symptom of how the tyrant "disgraced Roman affairs with his utter licentiousness."

Fragment 4 is about a person (whether male or female is unclear) who apparently exhibited good judgment in his or her choice of a mime, for the mime was skilled at using her beauty for deception. This could be a rhetorical exaggeration of Elagabalus' emergence in imperial politics. Though the contemporary sources are conflicting in details, they are at least unanimous that Elagabalus was a pawn of others, whether the dissolute Eutukhianos, his mother Sohaemias, his grandmother Maesa, his guardian Gannos, or some combination thereof. Deception is also a crucial part of the narrative: Elagabalus' descent from Caracalla was a fiction put out by those manipulating the political scene to legitimize the boy's claim to the throne (D.C. 79.31.1–3, 32.2–3; Hdn. 5.3.10–12). Fortunately for them, the boy played his part well, for physically he was a good representation (*mimas*?) of Caracalla and he secured the favor of the army by means of his erotic allure. Herodian is explicit on this point: though the soldiers were surprised that a member of the imperial family would be seen dancing in public, they were also attracted by his beauty (Hdn. 5.3.8). If this is a

fragment from the *Katêgoria*, it is probably from an early section of the oration.

Fragment 5 seems to be a stereotypical description of a *hetaira*, and Aelian may well have used similar language and imagery to describe Elagabalus' public dancing as surpassing that of the acrobats. The second part of the fragment, describing the wealth that the *hetaira* acquired by means of manipulating her victims, seems at first difficult to apply to Elagabalus: why would a Roman emperor concern himself with the paltry monetary gain of prostitution? But here, too, Dio offers a parallel: Elagabalus is said to have collected money from his "clients," even priding himself on his gains (D.C. 80.13.4). The fragment's reference to erotic jealousy (*zêlotupia*) also resonates with Elagabalus' sexual interest in the athlete Aurelios Zotikos, which inspired jealousy in the emperor's favorite charioteer and "husband" Hierokles (D.C. 80.16.6). Even if we imagine the anonymous "him" of Aelian's fragment referring to Hierokles, there are nevertheless significant differences. Dio's Hierokles drugs Aurelios so that he is unable to perform sexually, causing Elagabalus to banish the impotent athlete from Rome, whereas the *gunaion* of Aelian's fragment euphemistically freed her victim "from his present state," meaning probably that (s)he was the cause of his death. It also remains unclear how this might be related to the emperor's acquisition of wealth. Regardless, we can imagine Aelian representing Elagabalus as arousing the *zêlotupia* of his favorites because of the host of "clients" that he continued to entertain.

It must be born in mind that the *Katêgoria* would not have dealt with historical fact, but would rather have indulged in rhetorical exaggeration and with rumor. It will be conceded, therefore, that even if these fragments are not from the *Katêgoria* itself, then they at least offer Aelian's literary stylization of stereotypical scenes of *hetairai* and mimes that one would expect to find in an invective targeting an effeminate emperor.

A different series of fragments that Hercher grouped together, recounting a god's rape of a priestess, can also be considered relevant to a reconstruction of the *Katêgoria tou gunnidos*. This is fr. 50 Hercher, fr. 53a–i Domingo-Forasté:

6. ἦν δὲ ἰέρεια τῷ θεῷ κάλλος ἄμαχος. (*Souda* α- 1514)
And the priestess was invincible to the god for her beauty.
7. ὁμως ἡ ψυχὴ ὑπὸ τοῦ πόθου κυμαίνεται αὐτῷ, καὶ φλέγεται. (*Souda* κ- 2684)
Nevertheless his soul seethes with longing and is inflamed.
8. ὁ δὲ ἀκράτῳρ ἑαυτοῦ ὦν ἐσῆλατο ἐς τὸν νεῶν. (*Souda* ε- 3129)
But he, having no control over himself, rushed into the temple.

9. ὁ δὲ ἐσῆλατο ἐς τὸν νεών, ἔτοιμα δὴ καταγράφων, καὶ ὅτι τολμήσει ταῦτα ἐφ' οἷς ἐνόσει ἐπ' ἡρεμίας τῶν ἐπικουρῆσαι τῇ κόρῃ δυναμένων πεπιστευκώς. (*Souda* τ- 741)
But he rushed into the temple, indeed writing down what was imminent and that he would dare to do these things for which he was suffering, trusting that he wouldn't be disturbed by those who were able to come to the maiden's rescue.
10. ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἐφείσατο αὐτῆς ὁ ἐραστής ὁ ἐναγής, ἀλλ' ἐξαγαγὼν αὐτὴν τοῦ νεῷ πρὸς βίαν διέφθειρε μάλα ἀνοίκτως. (*Souda* π- 2610)
And the cursed lover did not spare her, but dragging her out of the temple he violently raped her without any pity.
11. ἦτις δεινὸν ἡγησαμένη καὶ φορητὸν ἦκιστα ξιφιδίῳ ἑαυτὴν διέφθειρε. (*Souda* φ- 594)
She, considering it terrible and in no way bearable, killed herself with a dagger.
12. ὁ δὲ πρὸ τῆς ἐς τοὺς πολεμίους συμπλοκῆς, ὡς εἶδεν ἀπολλύμενόν οἱ τὸν λεών, ἐνετολήσατο κακὸν κακῷ μείζονι ὁ παλαμναῖος ἄρα ἐκεῖνος σβέσαι. προστάττει γοῦν τὴν ἄθλιον παρθένον δίχα τεμεῖν. (*Souda* π- 46)
But before his struggle against the enemies, as he saw that his people were being destroyed, that murderer dared to quench an evil with a greater evil, yes he gives orders to cut the wretched virgin in two.
13. τὰ ἡμίτομα ἐπὶ κλινὰς βεβλημένα μάλα ἀβραῖς καὶ στρωμαῖς ὕφει τινὶ ὑπερφάνῳ κεκοσμημέναις ἐπιθέντας, ὑπὸ δασίν ἐνακμαζούσαις τῷ πυρὶ, καὶ τὸν ὑμέναιον ἄδουσῶν γυναικῶν, (ἐκέλευσεν ἐκ)κομισθῆναι μετὰ χορείας γαμηλίου τε καὶ κερτόμου. (*Souda* δ- 75)
Placing the halves tossed upon very soft couches and bedding, decorated with a sumptuous weaving, that blazed with fire from the torches, and while the women sang the marriage hymn, he ordered them to be brought out with a dancing both nuptial and mocking.
14. ἐμοὶ δοκεῖν, τοῦ Διονύσου τιμωροῦντος παρθένῳ δυστυχεῖ καὶ παθούσῃ τραγωδίας ἄξια. (*Souda* τ- 636)
I think, with Dionysus avenging a virgin unfortunate and suffering things worthy of tragedy . . .

Cassius Dio reports that Elagabalus not only lived with the Vestal Virgin Aquilia Severa but also “disgraced her most impiously” (ἀσεβέστατα ἥσχυεν, D.C. 80.9.3), boasting that he did so in order that he, a priest, might sire godlike children from a priestess. Dio says that this was an act for which the emperor should have been publicly scourged, imprisoned,

and executed. I am not convinced that the above fragments are from the *Katêgoria*: there is no evidence in the historical sources that Aquilia Severa killed herself or that Elagabalus mutilated her dead body in some strange mock wedding ceremony to expiate either his crime or the apparent suffering of the Roman people. Nevertheless the outrageousness of the scene depicted in the fragments gives some sense of how Aelian may have treated Elagabalus' sacrilegious marriage to the Vestal Virgin. He would surely have emphasized the emperor's *akolasia*, or inability to control his sexual desires; he would have exploited what Dio too thought of as the ridiculousness of a god needing marriage and children (D.C. 80.12.1); he would have vilified the impiety by emphasizing the brutality of the rape; and he may also have imbued his description of the wedding ceremony itself with an orientalizing exaggeration of the exoticism of foreign ceremonial (cf. D.C. 80.11).

These last three short fragments – not grouped together by Hercher or Domingo-Forasté – would have been entirely appropriate in Aelian's diatribe against Elagabalus. These are frs. 273, 290, 298 Hercher; 271, 287, 295 Domingo-Forasté.

15. θιάσόν τε μίμων καὶ κορδακιστῶν περὶ αὐτὸν μάλα πλῆθος εἶχε.
(*Souda* θ- 378)

And he had a very large company of mimes and dancers about him.

16. ὁ γύνανδρός τε καὶ μάλθων τύραννος. (*Souda* μ- III)

The androgynous and soft tyrant.

17. ὅσα ἐπράττετο, καὶ μοῦσά τις ἂν ὀκνήσειεν εἰπεῖν τραγική. οὐ γὰρ βούλεται ταῦτα γίνεσθαι, καὶ τὸ λέγειν ἀπηγόρευσε. (*Souda* μ- 1292)

The things that he did even a muse of tragedy would be reluctant to say. For she does not wish these things to happen and has forbidden speaking of them.

Fragment 15 could be used to emphasize Elagabalus' infamous interest in dancing, assimilating him to a performing emperor in the manner of Nero. As for fragment 16, Elagabalus' perceived effeminacy was well known, and this is just the kind of phrase Aelian would have used to describe him in the *Katêgoria*. Finally, one can easily imagine Aelian writing something like fragment 17, unwilling to publicize the more indecent of the emperor's licentious transgressions: if such deeds were unfit for the tragic stage, then the basest crimes of Elagabalus are unfit even for the moralist's scabrous invective.

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